

where is my mind? by ciders

Series: [losing will, and other fatalities](#) [1]

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Summary:

On November 6th, 1985, Will Byers crashed his bicycle while riding home from the Wheeler household, damaging his head and waking up two days later with no recollection of who he was.

Plagued with the absence of his memories and a dark haired boy who refuses to tell Will his name, all Will Byers has to do is remember. That's the hard part.

1. before

"What about this fella here? Do you know who that is?"

Everything hurts , Will thinks, his head weighing on his shoulders like a cast-iron cannon ball. *Everything hurts. Absolutely everything.*

Each muscle in Will Byers' neck aches thoroughly as he lifts his gaze to see who the elderly doctor standing by his bedside was referring to, his hand outstretched as though he is presenting an entertainer to an audience. It has felt like this since he'd woken up a few days before, even subtly. These gatherings felt to Will like some morbid talent show, the people surrounding him each giving dismal attempts at trying to bring the boy back to some distant memory they had once shared together. None of them have fallen into place, however. They won't no matter how frustrated Will gets over it. No matter how often he begs for something to slip through the cracks.

Will has been in this bed for three days, though only the remaining few hours of the third day has he seen. The rest he has spent wrapped in black nothingness, entangled inside of it like a bug in a web. Even in the few hours he's been awake and lucid, the pearly colour of the wallpaper has become seemingly more and more saturated and off-white, and the flowers he'd been gifted have already practically grown more dead than they were prior. He scrounges for some sense of understanding, for some emotional response to these stories beyond basic human compassion but he only comes up empty handed. He only watches in discomfort and worry as absolute strangers, though they weren't always, try and reel him back in. He only notices these flowers, the wallpaper, decaying with his memory. He just watches, confused, afraid-- curious. What else is there to do?

The last thing he remembers that isn't tainted like water splashes against old photographs is the few peaceful minutes of the beginning of his bike ride home. He'd been pedaling so hard, the doctor had suggested that he had veered off onto the manmade path through the woods that he had been eyeballing and flung himself face first down into the dirt, splitting his head open in an electric flash of pain that Will could only compare to the likes of being shot. Of course, the boy has never been shot. He's never been in any sort of dangerous situation like this one.

Everything from then on remains stippled and fuzzy, indistinct and distant like it's a memory that is years and years away, front or back. As much as Will crushes his face and squeezes his eyes and grips the cold metal arms of his hospital bed, he can't seem to make these stories come to fruition in his mind. What they entail, who they belong to-- he doesn't know. He wasn't able to tell years from minutes in the memories that *do* remain. However few they are.

Hell. He can't remember almost *anything* .

Each memory proposed to him feels like looking at a picture through an out of focus lens, desperately trying to make out the fine details of what once was a picturesque time in his childhood. Will falls short and hard every time. He knows the moment he is proposed such a question as that he will fall again, as his dark eyes settle on the sight of a tall, thin boy standing at the foot of his hospital bed. The boy, raven haired and doey-eyed, looks older than Will himself, in a certain way. The lines under his eyes, which are puffy and dark and exhausted. He'd been wrapped in a thin black sweater with a blazen red strip across the front of it. His hair, overgrown and wavy, sticks out in sleepless little strands here and there. He looks like he's never had a solid night's sleep. He looks unfamiliar, but warm. Warm even through the obvious distress painted across his face. *He's a friend* , Will thinks. He was a friend. Who is he now?

The boy looks like he has aged a year in merely days. Something tells the Byers boy that he isn't entirely devoid of blame.

He remembers going skating once with the older woman who brings him dark pink flowers and sleeps with her head resting against his hospital bed, just past his left kneecap. She's been there almost consistently, only parting from him a few times as he'd been told. *Joyce*. He knows this is his mother, and he knows this mostly by logic though he wouldn't admit it to her. He can sense the pain this causes her, the stress and tired hue that she's radiating. Why would he tell her such a thing? What good would that bring either of them? She was the first one who had come in to see him, following a frail looking gentleman who's older than him but not by much. *Jonathan*.

Joyce. Mom. Jonathan. Brother.

The young man at the foot of his bed, the boy who looks about his age in every way but his tired face, does not give a title. He doesn't give anything, really. He gives a small meek, ground-up sounding 'hey' when he first enters that morning, but not to Will. He spares no name, no line delivery. He spares no memory, even. When Will talks to him, the boy only seems to stare and fidget. Now that the two are really on the spot, he seems to be having trouble keeping eye contact.

It's been almost three full days. *He* hasn't left more than once, according to *Joyce*.

"Take your time."

Will stares at the boy, and after a few unblinking moments, the boy stares back. There is something sorrowful in his gaze, something reflective of secrets and evenings spent awake and stories that he knows Will won't be able to recite. Something broken sits deep inside the young man, something that aches just like Will does. *Say my name, Will* , it says.

Will wants to— remember, that is. The lens grows blurrier and blurrier, and the more he struggles to try and focus on the bleeding lines that trace out his fallen memories, the more he feels like he is upside down, trying to retrace his steps back to infancy.

Say my name. You know my name.

Will answers, sleepy and wounded, and his own voice sounded as foreign as he feels.

"No, I don't."

Notes for the Chapter:

Revised 06/2019

2. the paladin

Notes for the Chapter:

I update with new chapters every second Sunday usually but I'm going to be throwing these up pretty quick to catch up with my current spot in the fic!

Will Byers liked red. He liked the colour blue as well, but red seemed to be his favourite. This he guessed by common sense: his winter jacket was laced with crimson material, and the sheets and subtle detailing in the comforter he kept on his bed fell in agreement. So this is how he knew, when he couldn't recall it himself: Will Byers liked the colour red.

Will Byers liked horror films, or, at least, he liked the film *Jaws*, but that hardly counts. This was another concept he had decided was true, and the professional looking, iconic film poster that he had pinned up on his wall proved his point.

When Will had initially been released from the hospital and permitted to go home, only a few days after he'd been admitted, this was one of the first things he noticed when entering his bedroom as a brand new boy, devoid of previous connotations of what his room looked like to him. He had brushed his fingers carefully over the thin, well kept poster paper and stared into the half open jaws of the goliath shark that sat menacing in 2D format in front of him. It seemed almost tacky to him, then: did he find it tacky before? *I must have*, Will assumed.

From the previously safe trove that was his own bedroom, Will could hear his mothers tender voice speaking at a hushed frequency, presumably into the mouthpiece of their home phone. Joyce was soft spoken as it was: a woman with a kind face and motherly charm that Will was sure she had inherited long before he was ever born.

He could imagine why he must have loved her, and he felt like he

could love her once again. Just the concept that she was his mother, that she was the one who raised him and kept him safe all of those years that fell fuzzy against the back of his mind: some part of him loved her already, even if he could hardly remember who she was.

Will sat patiently on the edge of his bed, as though he was sitting in a stranger's room, hand pressed flat against the comforter as if he was judging it's cushioning. The tips of his pale fingers traced the soft, barely visible lining in which the material had been stitched and sewn so that it would last as long as it could before splitting. He imagined, in a way, that his brain was something like this: fabricated so that he would remember his friends faces, their laughs and their names and his favourite foods and the days he must have spent hanging out with his brother. The brain was meant to do that, wasn't it? *Remember?* Will found it odd, odd and a bit frustrating: the fact that he couldn't find the sadness inside of him like he expected there to be. He couldn't remember how good everything had been before, everything that he would be sad to miss. But he wasn't sad about it.

How could he be sad about something he couldn't even recall?

A gentle knock against the hardwood frame of the doorway into his room startled Will out of his brief trance, and he turned his attention to Joyce as she leaned into the doorframe. He hadn't even heard the phone slide back into it's wall holder, but then again, he hadn't even been looking for such a signal. It took him a moment to notice the pale coil around her finger, the phone clutched in her palm like she was hiding a deadly weapon. He hadn't heard it because she wasn't finished. So he *wasn't* slipping out of reality. Good to know.

"Hey, honey. D'you feel like going out today?" Joyce spoke gently, as though she was approaching a tiger who had slipped out of it's enclosure and was pacing circles around her. She wasn't afraid, no: rather, she seemed tentative, a little bit more aware of the fragility of the young boy sitting in front of her. She had a sleepless smile on her lips, and something about the de-saturated purple rings underneath her eyes suggested she was something other than cheerful that

morning. It made Will's stomach twist a bit, seeing her like that. He didn't know what she looked like when she was fully there, but he knew what absence looked like in her gaze. He didn't like it.

"Your friend, Lucas, he just called looking for you. Wanted to know if you want to hang out with him and the boys for a while," Joyce proposed with what sounded like a hopeful undertone beneath her words. Her chocolate brown hair was pulled back away from her face, sitting in a low bun that she could barely make from the length of her hair. Her eyes never left his face, and it took Will a moment before he realized why she was surveying him so hard.

She wanted to know if he remembered Lucas, or rather, remembered the darker skinned boy telling Will what his name was. The name he should have known, the name like all of the other names he'd been reintroduced to that fell tainted from Will's lips like ink on fresh cloth. He felt sick when he'd spoken to Lucas and Dustin, sick for all the wrong reasons. Sick like their names shouldn't have felt so absent and empty in his mouth. He knew who Lucas was, though, if only knowing the face and the name meant anything.

"Yeah... Lucas..." Will repeated, taking a painstaking note of the way Joyce's posture loosened when the words spilled from his mouth.

"I, uh... yeah, I want to see them. I'll go," Will spoke slowly, like he was convincing himself of this just as much as he was convincing his mother. Oh, in reality, Will might have been happy to bury himself underneath his bed sheets and never come out again. That wasn't the way to remember, though. Only to dwell on what he couldn't. Joyce gave the boy a simple, trying smile and disappeared back into the hallway, muttering something that sounded like a confirmation into the mouthpiece of their phone. Will's fingers, having halted as he'd spoken to his mother, fell from the comforter as he stood up and crossed the room towards his dresser, crouching down to tug open the drawers and sift through.

Will would have been happy to go out and spend some time with

Lucas, get to know him a little better than he did then. He wouldn't have minded hearing a couple stories about what the two of them might have gotten into before, wouldn't even mind a visit from Dustin, too. Will wasn't hesitant about them, but Joyce hadn't said 'just Lucas'.

Will was hesitant about a third party; the dark haired, freckle faced boy he'd seen at the hospital. The boy who's face he couldn't place.

The boy who refused to tell Will his name.

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By the time the Byers' car had pulled up to the curb in front of a home that Will tried desperately to remember, the sun was beginning to approach the tips of the trees lining the property's backyard and Lucas was already inching down the kickstand on his bike, turning his attention to the running car and throwing a wave towards Will as he peered out through the glass of the passenger seat window. Lucas was standing at the far end of the gravel driveway which housed a single, muddy brown, wood panelled station wagon, pulling his bike off to the side so that he didn't remain in the way. Will found himself staring upwards at the exterior of the home, his gaze connecting with the dark green shutters that framed each window and remaining there until he felt the subtle warmth of his mother's hand on top of his.

"Hey you," Joyce murmured in a soft tone, one that barely blew above a whisper, catching Will's attention as he felt the tap of a single finger against the top of hand.

"You'll be fine, honey. I'll come get you in a couple hours, okay? You can call me if you need anything. Karen has the house number," Joyce spoke in a voice that almost seemed to be directed more towards herself than Will, like she needed the reassuring just as much as he did. The slow build of anxiety twisting his nerves and making his palms sweat was creeping up on him, and the door to the house

that loomed in front of him almost seemed daunting. Will swallowed hard and gave a shallow nod.

“I know, mom. I’ll be fine,” Will muttered as his free hand clutched the door handle, pushing open the door and letting Joyce’s warmth drift from him as he climbed out of the car. Now he was convincing *himself*, or at least attempting to do so. The boy twisted back towards the vehicle, giving Joyce a trying smile before shutting the door behind him. He saw the subtle fall of her face, the slow burn of drowsiness that took over her eyes as she turned back towards the steering wheel. He could practically feel any warmth she’d held slip out of the car with him.

“Will!”

Turning back towards the young boy who was waiting for him, Will began a slow walk across the home’s manicured front lawn and towards Lucas, observing him in silence for several seconds as he crossed the gravel drive and met the Byers boy at the first thick stone piece of the walkway up to the front door.

“Hey,” Will replied, raising his gaze and taking a sly look at Lucas’ face before turning his head forward once more, staring down at his sneakers as he fell into a subtle quiet. He didn’t need to explain what he was doing, and he imagined Lucas didn’t need to look back at him to understand either. The two boys grew quiet for several moments.

He was fidgeting, even if it was only a tad: picking at a loose seam at the opening of the arm of his jacket, his gaze fluttering up and around and over the pale shingles of the house in front of them. He didn’t quite know why he was feeling so anxious, so—

“You okay? You look nervous.”

Will lifted his head and peered over at Lucas, his dark brows flicking upwards in surprise as the other boy stepped up to the front door,

placing a couple solid knocks against the thick wood. He felt as though the colour had drained from him, and before Lucas could turn and look at him, Will had his face angled downwards towards the frozen ground beneath him.

“Why would I be nervous? I’ve been here before, right?” Will murmured, voice holding the tone of an antsy child as he reached up and tugged at the fabric of his left jacket sleeve. From the corner of his eyes, he caught Lucas’ shrug.

“I dunno,” he started, his voice low and awkward. Then, after a beat, he added, or began to add: “You and—”

The front door let out a soft thump as the internal bolts slid out of their shut position, making Will jump briefly as though someone had given him a shock. As the door swung open easily, and Will clasped the fabric of his sleeve tightly between his fingers, staring into the opening of the door as though he was afraid of what he might see.

His gaze was immediately met by a dark pair of youthful eyes.

“Hey, Lucas,” the pale boy spoke, stepping back a bit from the door as though he was allowing space for the two of them to enter. He seemed sluggish, a bit subdued from the last time Will had seen him in the hospital. He was adorned in a striped shirt sporting multiple shades of blue as well as a pair of honey brown khaki pants. His dark hair was pulled back behind his ears and, as Will was beginning to take note of how purple the soft flesh underneath his eyes was tinted, the boy turned to look at him.

“Hey, Will,” he added slowly, as though the words were leaving a trace against his taste buds. Will opened his mouth as though he was going to respond, but his lips slammed shut as a curious smile formed on the boy’s mouth. Curious but dull, as though he knew very well Will wouldn’t be able to respond quite the same. As though he knew, but he wished he didn’t.

Lucas took this brief moment to step in through the front door, giving the dark haired kid a tender prod in the ribs before escaping out of sight. The boy recoiled, a deeper grin crossing over his lips for no more than a second before his passive expression returned. Will was staring. *Hewas* staring too, but his stare seemed softened somehow. Like he wasn't quite sure who's turn it was to speak.

"You can come in, you know."

Snapped out of his minor stupor, Will forced an uneasy smile as he stepped up and into the boy's home, taking every measure he could to avoid making any sort of eye contact with him as his face grew flushed from the blast of warmth to his cheeks. Will's senses were immediately greeted by the dim, golden lighting of the home's foyer, sandy brown carpeted stairs winding upwards to the side. The only room in the main floor that seemed to be graced by any sort of natural light was the living room, in which a single, rectangular window with sheer, pearlescent curtains served to illuminate the furniture in the room with a crisp, late afternoon glow. The smell of baking cinnamon and freshly cut pine needles greeted Will's nose, and could have sworn he felt goose bumps rise against his upper arms. Nothing came with the pleasantries of the scents, nothing but a warm irritation that bubbled up inside the pit of Will's stomach. Taking a look back at the lanky boy as he closed the front door behind them, Will caught a glimpse of Lucas as he disappeared at the edge of the foyer into the hallway. Will took no time to hurry after him in hopes that he wouldn't have to consider the fact that he had no idea where he was going.

Will discovered quickly (and he liked to imagine that he had felt this way before the accident) another fact about himself: he *loved* the smell of the dark haired boy's basement.

The aroma of lumber and shag rugs and the passing undertones of scented candles that burned down there at one point in the past graced the boy's nose as he descended into the basement, ignoring the soft creak of the wooden steps as he reached the bottom. The

basement was cozy, and Will didn't have to spend a lot of time in there to know that for sure. There were couches parked just to the left of the stairs, against the wall, only illuminated by a lamp that Will assumed housed the same type of yellowed bulb that they had in the living room upstairs. Warm, golden light flooded the old chesterfield, practically inviting Will to take a nap on its likely scratchy surface.

In the middle of the room, to the right of the last step was a rounded table, with a rather detailed game board slapped down in the middle of it. Cushions and playing pieces littered the immediate floor area around it, while several multi-faceted dice laid spread out on the top of the board. Seated behind the table but facing the steps was a boy Will remembered, however subjective that term could be, as Dustin. He'd not minded that Will couldn't remember his name when asked, and instead, he'd simply introduced himself with a wide, toothless grin that made even Will crack a small smile. He couldn't exactly tell if he'd meant it— not minding— but if he hadn't, Will figured Dustin made a pretty good liar. That, or he had plenty of hope.

"Took ya long enough to get here! I was just gonna call to see if you died on the way he—" Dustin began as his head lifted from the black, plastic form of what appeared to be a walkie clutched in his right hand. As the curly haired boy spotted Will, his eyes almost seemed to light up with enthusiasm.

"Hey, Will. Glad you could make it. Our regular dungeon master is slackin' off, so I get to take the reigns today," Dustin gleamed, shooting a brief look of disapproval towards the dark haired boy as he slid past Will. The boy, waving a hand in dismissal at Dustin, approached one of the pillows.

"Shut up," he murmured, a hiss in passing even if Will could sense that he meant nothing by it.

Peeling off his jacket and hesitantly hooking it on the railing of the stairs in absence of a coat hanger, Will observed the three as they

seemed to coalesce around the circular table that Dustin was seated at. Feeling almost out of focus as he stared at the set up, Will made his way towards the group, crouching down between Lucas and the boy in the blue shirt and placing the tips of his fingers against the edge of the board. His eyes roamed the fine lines and details the piece held, and he would have remained there studying it if he hadn't been addressed. Or, at least, he assumed he was being addressed.

"Hey, *cleric*— d'you remember how to play?"

Will lifted his head and looked towards the direction the voice had come from, catching Lucas' gaze as he turned towards him. His tone was patient, curious rather than pressing but Will could tell by the instant shift in his expression that he realized he'd asked a stupid question. This hit Will too, a soft hurt that ran its course up through his headspace. Lucas didn't have any reason to feel bad, of course he didn't.

"Cleric?" Will opened his mouth to repeat, but the voice that escaped his lips sounded foreign.

"Of course he doesn't remember how to play. How *would* he?"

The sharp voice of the dark haired boy rose up through the air that surrounded the four of them, catching each of them off guard. It took Will only a fraction of a second to realize the voice wasn't that of his own croaking out a response, and his lips fell closed as he glanced over at the boy. Will saw something reflected in his face, resonating with the irritation in his voice that he hadn't expected, nor wanted to see. The boy looked like he'd been stung, brows furrowed tight as he glared down at the set up in front of him and reached out a freckled hand, snatching one of the die off of the board and studying the thin engraved numbers painted over with cheap gold paint. Will's throat felt like it was threatening to slam shut, more from an overwhelming sense of guilt choking him than anything with a semblance to anger. If anything, he understood.

He felt it.

“No,” Will spoke after a moment of brief, tense silence between the four of them, his eyes averted to the board but still able to pick up the shift in the freckled boy’s posture. He was looking at him straight on, but Will continued to study the faint creases in the cardboard beneath his fingertips. “I don’t remember. You’re right. But...” Will admitted, pressing his tongue against the back of his teeth as he considered his words. He wrapped his arms, heavily covered by the thick grey jumper he was wearing, around his knees as he continued.

“You could *show* me?” Will offered slowly, picking his sullen gaze up from the play-mat and turning to look over at the dark haired boy. He looked almost entirely different from the pissy, scorned teenager he had seen only moments before: he looked simply stunned. His brows were raised in surprise as he studied Will, like he hadn’t even known the boy was there. Like he was surprised that Will could still speak. As he watched Will, his stare softened and he turned back to look at the die in his hand.

It took Will a moment to realize he’d been holding his breath.

“Yeah... yeah. We’ll show you,” the unnamed boy spoke suddenly, nodding and twisting the die between his fingers as he watched the gold writing sparkle ever so slightly underneath the dim basement light. For a moment, he seemed to drown inside the sea of blue that made up his top. Then, he reached out and dropped the dice back onto the board, placing the tips of his fingers against the edge of the table as he watched it settle into the crease of the mat. Will was staring once more, this time in, what, confusion? Intrigue? He wasn’t really sure. He leaned forward and rested his elbows against the bare splash of polished wood the board had allotted on the table top, laying his arm flat and letting his chin rest against his forearm. The three boys picked up pretty quickly, nothing less than enthusiastic and full of life as they proceeded through their campaign like they’d been doing this for centuries before their bodies and souls had collided. Will caught on quickly, sitting as peacefully as a boy his age

could be, his face cradled in the nook of his elbow as he watched the boys traverse through hellish landscapes and beautiful sceneries as imaginary as they were glorious. Will had found himself closing his eyes as he listened to Dustin spill out his descriptions, detailing little things that Will could only imagine fantasy writers coming up with.

He only opened his eyes periodically to place the boys' positions on the board, but each time he did, he couldn't help but feel like he was being stared at.

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Will had discovered another fact (or at least, he was beginning to think it was a fact) about the old Will: his mom was always late.

Will yanked his jacket tighter over his chest, slightly irked by the fact that having the front of his jacket zipped up tight to his chin seemed to do nothing to protect him from the chill of the November evening. There hadn't yet been a solid snowfall that year, at least, not since the days that he'd had full reconnaissance, only thick frost that splattered car windshields in the early hours of the morning like thick paint. The air was chilly enough to allude to a coming of snow, however, and Will would have stayed inside if he could. If he had the willpower to do so.

He felt like just as much of an intruder in the freckled boy's home as he did his own, and so he had perched himself on the front step, waiting patiently with nothing but the dull glow of the front porch light to keep him company.

Until he heard the door creak softly open behind him, and he felt the presence of someone inching over and stepping down to take a seat next to him.

"You could wait inside if you want, Will. It's only gonna get colder

out here,” the familiar voice spoke as the dark haired boy lowered himself down to sit next to Will, his blue t-shirt merely an exposed slip from underneath a thick, olive green reversible jacket. Will rested his arms against the tops of his knees, his eyes remaining trained and focused out towards the street.

“My mom is gonna be here soon, anyways. Besides, I don’t—” Will began to explain, catching himself as he felt his sentence draining into something that he didn’t feel was alright to mention. The dark haired boy let out a weak laugh, however, a soft plume of hot breath drifting upwards into the winter air.

“You don’t want to be in there?” he questioned. Will’s face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“N-no, that’s not what I meant. I just... I didn’t want to intrude,” Will spoke briskly, as though he was trying to get his explanation out quickly. He pursed his lips, turning to glance at the half silhouette of the boy next to him, his figure semi-doused in porch light.

“That’s okay. I don’t like being in there sometimes either,” the boy spoke, tiny puffs of breath dissipating in the gentle breeze. Will kept his eyes trained on the deep shadow of the boy, as though he was trying to see his face through the layers of darkness.

“I hope you had fun. I know we get a little crazy sometimes. Actually, I’m pretty impressed. You seemed like you were falling asleep,” the boy added with an embarrassed laugh, a sound so timid Will found it surpassing even the delicate twinkle of bells. Familiar. *That’s the word of the day*, Will thought. Familiar. But it wasn’t enough.

“I *was* listening. Not falling asleep,” Will corrected in a hushed tone, turning his gaze out towards the end of the boy’s driveway. He could see the slowly growing sight of headlights peeling down the street towards the kid’s home. “Dustin is really good at descriptions. I could practically picture myself standing in the places he was talking about.

Besides, you guys seemed to be enjoying it. You must not really need a cleric to play, anyways,” Will murmured, dropping his gaze from the street for a brief moment to allow himself to stand. He hadn’t intended to sound pitiful, rather, he wanted to lighten any subtext in his absence from playing.

What was this chit chat? Was this how they spoke before it happened — before Will forgot? He knew, deep down that it wasn’t. The problem he found was that he didn’t know which of them was feeding into it more.

“That’s not true,” the boy spoke suddenly, his voice holding a subtle pain to it that caught Will off guard. Before he could respond however, the boy was moving again.

“I’ll see you around, Will,” the boy spoke from behind him, having risen and steadied himself before turning back towards his front door. Will stared out at the sight of his mother’s car as she pulled up to the curb, looking out towards the porch and giving a small wave. Something about the way the boy had been so quick to leave him there, so quick to let him go: Will found that he was turning around before he could begin his walk to the car.

“Why are you doing this?”

Inches from the door, the dark haired boy’s hand hovered just over the shiny gold doorknob as though he was frozen in time. Letting his hand drop, he turned back towards Will, silhouetted once more against the porch light though not before Will could catch a glimpse of the anxious look on his face as he turned.

“Doing what?”

“*This*,” Will spoke, raising a hand as though he was gesturing to the space between them. “You haven’t told me your name. Dustin...

Dustin and Lucas, neither of them will say it. Or tell me. So why?" Will continued, letting out a slow exhale as though he'd just dropped a weight off of his shoulders. "What's *your* name?"

The boy stood stagnant for a moment, the light giving him a soft, angelic outline like Will had crossed over and he was at the pearly gates themselves. He stood like this for a moment, and for a brief second Will had imagined he'd frozen from the cold before he shoved his left hand deep into his pocket, turning back to the front door of his home and resting his hand on the doorknob again. He twisted and pushed, and before Will could protest, the dark haired boy turned back to him, the blue of his shirt catching in the light.

Blue. That's how he felt. That's how he sounded. He was blue.

"*You tell me,*" the boy replied, and he slipped back in through the front door of his home, leaving Will Byers in the cold.

3. the length of imagination

“Blue?”

Hawkins Middle School, situated politely in the Roane County School District, seemed like a rather simple place to navigate if you had any semblance of an idea as to where you were going. The halls were covered in polished green paint, floors tiled in colours that didn't clash. The school wasn't even overly large, if anything, it was a bit undersized for the amount of students that attended it. The classrooms were pretty straightforward, and the washrooms were even easier to discover. The only problem Will found, and the most significant problem that he could face in such a situation, was that he was entering the school as though he had never seen it before in his entire life.

“That’s what you’re gonna call him?”

In reality, the school board hadn't expected Will to return to his studies for at least another week, presuming that he was on bed rest, or not even released from the hospital yet. There had been nobody telling the boy that he had to be at school that morning except himself, something he was sure he would never have done before his accident. He didn't know where else he could preoccupy himself however, that wasn't his home.

He didn't hate being at his house, rather, he hated feeling trapped there. If anything, Will took a bit of comfort in the fact that the things he was surrounded with in his own bedroom were traits, facts and signals of the boy he was before everything turned blank inside his brain. He could look at his race car sheets and know that he found that cool, that the designs had caught him. He could look at his

sketchbook and understand that he liked to draw, liked to colour even more than draw. He'd even thrown a sketchbook and several coloured pencils in his bag that morning to keep himself busy at school before he escaped out the front door. Jonathan had been waiting patiently in the driver's seat of their dark green Ford Pinto, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel to the soft hum of music coming from the car's built in radio.

Will found that Jonathan looked strikingly similar to Joyce already in his facial features, but the drowsiness that seemed to swarm over their entire household only enhanced this. They were both tired, both in need of a solid sleep and a load off of their chests. It made them look almost identical, if only briefly in Will's eyes.

Will was handling the pain of everything in a different way, taking it with pursed lips and a firm grip and not letting it destroy him yet. He had hope. Whether it was pointless or not to cling to it, he hadn't decided yet. But he wanted to remember, wanted so desperately to remember that he wouldn't mind if it was the last thing he did. If it would take the pain out of his mother's eyes, he wouldn't mind at all.

"Earth to Will?"

Lifting his head from the small Tupperware container in front of him, Will Byers tore his gaze away from the crust of his sandwich that he had hastily been picking apart. He had been spacing, he knew this, and he took a moment to glance around the heavily crowded cafeteria as he regained his sense of where he was. The students hadn't been on lunch break very long, maybe fifteen minutes at best. He'd been so lost in thought about that morning that he had completely zoned out Lucas and Dustin as they sat before him.

“Sorry,” Will mumbled in an embarrassed half-apology.

“I mean, I *personally* don’t get it,” Dustin spoke up as though he’d been waiting silently to comment, resting an elbow on the table as he watched Will pick at his food. In front of Dustin was a juice pack, open and half empty, but he didn’t seem to have anything to snack on. He didn’t appear to be too bothered by this. “Then again, *I* can remember what his name is,” Dustin carried on, shooting a distasteful look at Lucas as the boy gave him a solid kick underneath the table.

Will’s brows raised only slightly as he observed the two of them, not exactly clueing into the fact that he’d spoken his shabby nickname for the dark hair boy out loud. When he realized this, however, his face flushed a bright pink and he turned his attention back down towards his food. He wasn’t going to touch it any longer, but it was better to look at something that wouldn’t catch on to his embarrassment.

“It’s all I’ve got,” Will pressed, returning to look up at Lucas once he felt like the tone in his cheeks had begun to dissipate. Will slid the cover of his container out from underneath it and snapped it into place over the opening, letting out a long sigh as though he’d been keeping it held in for hours.

“I can’t just call him ‘the asshole who won’t tell me his name’, can I?” Will grumbled as he reached up a small hand, snatching his sandwich container off of the table and twisting towards the back of his chair to slide it into his bag. He could have pretended like he was irritated about the whole situation more than he truly was, but he knew that it likely wasn’t going to get him anywhere. If the boy didn’t want to tell him who he was, to leave Will to figure it out on his own as if he had perfect control over his own mind, then Blue is who this boy would

become. Blue is what he had given him and Blue he would be. As Will zipped up the front of his backpack, he could hear Dustin let out a laugh from behind him.

“It’s a little long if you ask me,” Dustin spoke, waiting until Will had twisted back around and rested his elbows on the table before continuing his sentence.

“He can be a bit of an asshole, though. That’s just---“ Dustin paused, as though he was trying to figure out where he was going with his sentence. Will caught on to what he was doing immediately, silent frustration nipping at him like unkempt flames.

“That’s just *Blue*,” Dustin finished through a bleak sigh, giving Will an apologetic look before he picked his juice box up from the lunch table, sipping it as though it would keep him from saying anything else. The name sounded just as irregular coming out of Dustin’s mouth to Will as the concept of what the boy’s real name might be.

“He’s taking it out on me,” Will said abruptly, running his pointer finger over a small scratch that scarred the table top like an old wound as he felt a twinge of guilt simmer deep down inside the pit of his stomach.

“You know, I get it, I guess but...” Will murmured, his sentence trailing off as he sat for a moment to consider. He hated the idea that this was his fault, even if technically, it was *entirely* of his own doing. If he hadn’t ridden his bike home that evening, if he even walked it home instead he might have ended up in a completely different circumstance than the one he was in now: the one where half of him felt like it was missing. He didn’t want to be like this. Blue knew that, right? He had to.

From across the table, out of the corner of Will's eyes, he noticed Lucas shifting a bit forward in his seat.

"It's not fair, though. He doesn't need to take this out on you. *We* aren't," Dustin announced in a rather sour tone.

"*We* aren't *him*, though," Lucas interrupted suddenly, catching the attention of the two boys as he spoke.

Dustin, lips falling closed, went silent in response, like a solid point had just been made; a point that went directly over Will's head. Will eyed the boy sitting across from him curiously, as though what Lucas said was spoken in confidence, even if it didn't really resonate with him. He couldn't see how Blue was all that different from his other two friends, how his suffering seemed to have more of a hard core to it. By the way that Blue seemed to be taking this, entirely different in comparison to the two boys that sat across from him, Will imagined that they must have been closer than he could remember, which wasn't saying much. It still stung the small boy, however: the way that Blue had looked when Will had admitted that he didn't remember how to play the game the evening before, like a child that was trying to keep from crying after scraping his knees.

He wanted to feel for Blue, somewhere deep down he did. He just didn't know how to feel for someone he didn't know.

Regardless of the fact that Will had been expecting to see all three of the boys at lunchtime, Blue was nowhere to be seen. Will didn't feel like he'd needed to question Lucas or Dustin about it, only knowing that he would feel nosy in doing so. The two boys might not have

even known where he was anyways, and yet Will still felt like he had something to do with his absence. A self centered thought, but a thought that plagued his brain nevertheless. He might have dwelled on this forever if the sound of Lucas' voice hadn't snapped him out of it.

"They're going to start decorating for the Snow Ball," Lucas had mumbled to Dustin as the two boys observed what appeared to be one of the schools' janitors making his way through the gentle hustle and bustle of the lunch room with a long, steel ladder tucked under his left arm and a thin, rolled up banner clutched underneath his right. Will turned towards the direction they were staring in, and watched in a curious silence as the older gentleman propped the ladder up against the doorframe of the cafeteria entrance, beginning to unravel the banner. Pale blue, glittery writing revealed itself in careful paint swipes, spelling out half of what Will decided were the words "Snow Ball".

"The Snow Ball?" Will questioned, watching as the janitor seemed to struggle a tad with the large decoration he was unrolling.

"Just a stupid dance they have every December, before break," Lucas spoke from out of Will's sight as he stared outwards towards the scene in front of him. If the idea of a dance would have piqued Will's interest before, it most definitely did not now. He couldn't imagine the idea of wearing anything more fancy than a button up, and dancing with someone practically gave him the cold sweats just considering it. He let the statement fall flat from Lucas' mouth.

"Sounds dumb," Will muttered in uncommitted agreement, tearing his eyes away from Lucas as he scanned the walls of the cafeteria, the overbearing hum of conversation surrounding them was almost too distracting as his gaze settled on the wall clock. There were ten

minutes left to the student's lunch break, and Will had been floating through the school like a ghost for both of his first periods, unsure of where to go and not planning on attending even if he could recognize the hallways and room numbers like the palm of his hand. He'd gotten several stares when he had arrived that morning, and he was almost positive that his teachers knew he was in the building. Nobody had come looking for him, however. He prayed that it would stay this way.

Before Will could open his mouth to suggest that he should escape the cafeteria before the bell sounded, though, he was interrupted by the slam of a fist against the table top, causing the three boys to jump just slightly in their seats like frightened animals.

"Morning, *freaks*," a low yet childish voice hissed from behind Will's head, causing him to cringe slightly as he leaned forward in his seat. He didn't have the guts to turn around and look right up into the face of whoever was standing behind him, and as he peered across the table at the two boys sitting with him, he could make a solid assumption that turning around most definitely would not be a good idea. Will could feel his heart beginning to thump in his chest, his fingers pressing a little too hard against the palm of his hand as he listened to the figure behind him clear his throat.

"What do you want, Troy?" Lucas muttered unenthusiastically, avoiding eye contact.

"Where's frog face today?" Troy chided from behind Will, virtually ignoring Lucas as his thin hand laid flat on the table. Will imagined he was surveying the three of them like a predator eyeing its prey.

"Did he bump his noggin too?" he continued, a giddy and overly

enthusiastic laugh escaping his mouth as though he thought his crude joke was the funniest thing he'd heard in a while. Will found himself almost involuntarily turning inwards, his eyes averted to the face of the table as Troy continued to poke fun at them. He couldn't pin point the familiar sound of the boy's voice, but the feeling that his words were giving him wasn't too distant of a memory: the self deprecating sting of his teasing caught Will easily. It took the boy a moment to understand what Troy was suggesting, but when he did, he felt a slow burn of irritation building in his throat, almost suffocating him in a way that he didn't expect. The words slipped out of the Will's mouth before he could think to stop himself, immediately knowing that he was going to regret it in some shape or form.

Troy was talking about Blue.

"Why don't you shut up?" Will snapped suddenly, twisting back towards where Troy was standing, but not before catching the look of absolute fear that had dawned on Lucas' face.

This told him enough, before anything else, that he was about to pay the price for what he'd said. Will could feel his heart thudding hard inside his chest as he looked upwards at Troy, taking note of the fact that nothing physical about the boy was overtly intimidating. Dark haired with deeply set, dark eyes to match, Troy stared down at Will with a look which seemed to be a mix of surprise and anger, like Will had just given him a good, solid punch to the nose.

"What did you just say?" Troy hissed in a low tone, as though his only intention was for Will to hear him. Will felt as though his throat was ready to slam shut, staring into the eye of a boy who looked like he wouldn't mind getting detention for busting open Will's face. He didn't know why he spoke, why he decided that he needed to say

something. He could have stayed silent, let it pass like his friends. Something inside of him had felt like he'd been jabbed a little too hard when Troy had spoken about Blue, however. For whatever reason, he couldn't ignore it. He'd gotten himself into this situation, and if he was going to put his head into the lion's jaws, he may as well yank a tooth while he was in there.

"I said---

Will didn't have any time to reiterate himself before Troy reached out and snatched the collar of Will's jacket at what felt like lightning speed, yanking the boy towards him. Will's hand shot out and grabbed onto the edge of the table before he could feel his chair tip over, his eyes growing wide as though he thought he was about to go face first into the floor.

Pressing closer to Will's face, Troy's expression held a vicious sneer that practically spoke for itself: *say it again, Will*, it said. *Say it again and I'll cut your tongue out.*

It was here that Will understood why Lucas had looked at him like he was looking at a dead man. Troy wasn't scary because he was bigger: he was scary because he didn't care if he had to hurt someone to prove himself.

Troy's gaze tore away from Will after only a moment of confrontation, taking in the sight of the janitor who had stopped what he was doing and was peering over towards the boys' table. Troy's brows furrowed, as though he had been greeted by some rude interruption, and he released Will's jacket from his grasp, watching in disdain as the small boy slid back into his seat. Will stared at Troy only briefly before averting his eyes like a kicked dog. Mere moments before he was mentally preparing himself to get a good hook to the side of his face, and now he was cowering in front of his two best

friends like the courage had been zapped right out of him.

“You three better watch it. Especially *you*,” Troy growled from behind Will’s back, giving the boy one last ignorant shove into the edge of the table before he rounded the corner and made his way back towards the cafeteria’s exit. The gentle sound of footsteps drifting away from the boys’ seats was a much needed relief for Will, and the boy let out a short exhale, turning his gaze upwards at Lucas and Dustin. From the way they were looking at him, Will would have sworn they’d just watched him grow another head and breathe fire. For several moments that felt like hours, Will thought they were going to sit in silence forever.

“That was *awesome*,” Dustin whispered abruptly, turning his gaze from Will to Lucas. The two boys stared at each other for only a moment before crumbling into a fit of laughter, their voices nearly drowned out by the sound of conversation echoing through the room. Will stared at the two, unable to contain himself as he erupted into giggles as well, the pure adrenaline of the situation beginning to die down. He was petrified, scared that he was going to have to explain to his mother under what circumstance he was granted fresh bruises on his face, but he'd gotten off free. But Dustin was right.

It was awesome.

The old Will Byers liked to draw. But the new Will Byers *loved* to draw.

Of course, it was likely that he had adored it the entire time and the almost cathartic experience he was having was just something regular. After the bell had rung signaling that it was time for everyone to head back to their classes, Lucas and Dustin had drifted out of the cafeteria with the rest of the crowd, sparing waves as they disappeared into the massive shuffle of students and leaving Will to try and figure out where he should go next. Class still seemed like a desperate reach to him, and not knowing which classes he even needed to be in, Will had wandered the hallways until he came across a universally familiar sight: the school library. He'd entered, head down as though he knew this was not the place for him to be, but found gratitude in the fact that, though the librarian had clearly noticed him coming in by himself, she didn't say a word to him about it.

Will had made his way into the first isle that he saw, not really checking to see what genre he was browsing as his soft hazel eyes scanned the rows upon rows of books that sat in front of him. Lifting a hand as he came across what he was looking for, Will's fingers ran along the spine of a thick but well worn encyclopedia. He imagined that the pages between the two covers must have been yellowed with time at that point, bent and dog tagged from years of use. He didn't exactly mind this, and even thought that such a fact gave the book more character. He tugged it off of the shelf, bracing a hand underneath as the sheer weight of the book thudded into his palm.

He didn't really care what the book looked like on the inside, anyways: he wasn't going to be reading it.

Tucking the weighted book underneath his right arm, Will shot a look back over towards the librarian's desk to ensure that she was preoccupied before he slunk through the isle and out towards the back corner of the library, hidden between the abundance of

bookshelves. It wasn't that he didn't find the idea of sitting at the tables favourable: rather, he knew he was already pushing his buttons by skipping out on class. He didn't need for the librarian to have another reason to want to boot him out of there, especially if he wasn't there to work.

Will draped his jacket carefully against the slightly dusty tile flooring and eased himself down onto the floor, crossing his legs in front of him and inching back a bit so that he was tucked right into the corner. He liked this angle: nothing could surprise him, and he could hear anyone coming in advance if he had to pretend like he was doing some research. Pulling the large encyclopedia up onto his lap, Will rested a hand on top of the aging cover as he dug his other hand into his backpack. Pulling out his sketchpad first, Will set it gently on top of the book and proceeded to dig out his coloured pencils.

He'd decided that morning that he loved the drawings that were encased in his sketchbook, subtle hints at who he was and what he liked to draw. Will had considered that thoroughly, and, as he had ripped the pieces out carefully by their glued seam, he had decided he would keep them as a reminder of who Will Byers was. They felt like inked clues to him, a delicate piece of his history that he needed to keep around. History wasn't meant to be repeated, though, was it?

So he had ripped them out.

Will stared down at the blank, stark white piece of paper that was turned up in front of him. Clutching one of his coloured pencils between his fingers, Will gazed at the paper and willed it to give him an idea. He wanted to draw something that was important to him, but this was the problem. The dividing line between important and unimportant was fuzzy now, and he had a hard time differentiating what he had claimed as either. Everything was both, and neither at

the same time.

Staring down at the sheet, Will glanced over to his colours as he attempted to rack his brain for something, *anything* to inspire him. Rainbow hues graced his vision, granting him almost nothing to go on. Pressing his tongue against the roof of his mouth in frustration, Will returned his stare to the page in front of him and poised the pencil he'd snatched from the bunch. If anything, he needed to have his name on the paper. He readied his hand and began tracing out the letters of his name at the top right corner in blue coloured pencil.

His hand froze.

Will hadn't had much to go on in the first place, and turning to the idea of his friends almost seemed worse than nothing. He hardly knew the three boys anymore, hardly knew Dustin and Lucas let alone the boy who wouldn't tell him his name. Blue.

What did Will see him as? A stranger, or somebody he could imagine being friends with at one point? Being *best friends* with? The idea that this boy wanted to keep himself so hidden made Will nauseous, confused and conflicted and unable to understand why the boy wouldn't want him to know who he was, who he had been. Will paused.

Maybe that was why he hadn't told him: because he wanted him to figure it out. However unfair, however impossible it felt to Will, the concept itself sat.

Blue didn't want Will to *not* know him. He likely wanted the

opposite.

Will began to draw, considering every fine line that he made as he stared down at the paper before him. He wanted to know Blue, to know who he was not by the colour that he had worn or the freckles that dotted his cheeks or the stupid grin he got on his face whenever he spoke to Lucas and Dustin, the same grin they probably had once shared. Will wanted to know Blue for who he was without such a stupid nickname, such a stupid colour. Blue lines crisscrossed on the page in front of him, tracing out features and identifiable traits that Will could draw from memory, as poor as his was.

He drew Blue.

I will remember, Will thought. I will remember if it's the last thing I do.

4. talking in your sleep

Through the course of the first week and a half of being home and away from the pristine, white walled confinement of the hospital, Will Byers discovered many facts about his life and who he had been. Some of them fit against him like a puzzle piece, like a perfect spot had been chiselled out inside of him just for them. Others felt loose, misshapen like he could picture somebody else being such a way but never himself.

One of those misshapen concepts was friendship.

Will could imagine himself having friends before hand, and he knew it was a fact that he did. Such a fact felt hollow, however: and not knowing what kind of a person he was definitely helped flesh it out. He could see the beauty in people like Lucas and Dustin, even Blue. They were set on helping the boy understand who he had been, and even more so than that, they were set on helping him *remember*.

Equally, Will understood why they were so frustrated. They wouldn't show it any more than the subtle look of misunderstanding in their eyes that Will caught on occasion as they told him stories of what the four of them used to get up to. Will always noticed, however, and through the mild sting it would send up through his chest, he understood. He wasn't the only one who was hurting. Friendship was a loose fact.

Oddly enough, though, a pretty concrete fact that Will had discovered as he had crawled out of bed just after 9am on that first gloomy Saturday morning, was that he loved music.

Will had been tossing and turning for the majority of the early morning, whether his body had been trying to wake him or he was just uncomfortable, only he knew. He'd been in the centre of some dismal dream, an almost inescapable scene that his brain had abandoned the moment he'd opened his eyes. The only thing that remained with the boy from such a nightmare, even temporarily, was the sickening feeling that clouded his torso like a thick fog, as well as the distant visual of snowflakes drifting towards the forest floor.

Will opened his eyes in a careful squint, shying away from the sunlight that was streaming blindly through his window. Another fact that he was quick to discover was that Will Byers was not, *not* a morning person. Before his senses had fully come to, the boy rolled over and gave a good yank to his comforter, knowing full well that half of it was trapped underneath his side. Raising his head and pushing stray hair away from his eyes, Will eyed the clock sitting on the night table next to his bed, able to make out the numbers '9:12' through his blurry vision. He was still half asleep yet, so much so that he abandoned his efforts and dug his face into the crook of his elbow to block out the light briefly. He remained silent, though as he laid crumpled up like this, it struck him as to why he was awake at such an early time, especially on a Saturday.

From his bedroom, Will could hear the sound of music blasting through the wall across the hallway.

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Climbing out of bed, Will crossed the threshold of his room in several lazy strides, giving his eyes a gentle rub. He could feel the subtle vibrations coming from whatever sound system Jonathan was using through the floorboards, and the disruptive sensation that rose up through Will's feet almost made him want to hop back into bed and

remain wrapped up in his sheets for the rest of the morning.

Though he couldn't confirm it himself, Will came to the conclusion that his older brother was one of two things. He was either a serious morning person, breakfast at the crack of dawn and all, or he was bat shit crazy.

Opening up his bedroom door with a delicate creak, Will was greeted with a closed light wood door directly across from his room, further proving just how loud Jonathan must have been playing his music. Will stepped out into the hallway quietly, glancing down towards the front door and taking in the relative stillness of the house, even with rock music creating the home's Saturday morning ambience. Through the muffled sound of guitar riffs and drums, Will could barely make out the words to the song as he approached Jonathan's door. Placing a hand on the knob and slowing his roll a bit, Will hesitated as though he was taking in what he was hearing.

‘ Dark in the city night is a wire

Steam in the subway earth is afire’

Will's hands fell from the doorknob as he listened to the track that was playing. The sound of the guitar and the rhythm of the song was undeniably catchy, and for a moment, he just stood and listened to the music.

Letting his eyes close for several seconds before he remembered his reasoning for approaching Jonathan's bedroom in the first place, Will's eyes fluttered open and his hand returned to the knob. As he wrapped his fingers around the piece, Will took notice of the gentle bob of the door and, understanding now truly why he'd been waken

up so easily in the first place, he gave the door a gentle push.

The door gave a gentle creak as it swung open easily, though it went unnoticed as it was drowned out by the volume of the music.

‘Woman you want me give me a sign

And catch my breathing even closer behind’

The first thing Will noticed about Jonathan’s room was the blankets on his bed. Interestingly, the majority of his bedroom was bathed in neutrals and various shades of grey, in contrast with the colorfully striped lounging blanket that he kept on his bed, thin and knitted tightly. Will couldn’t imagine that his mother had made it, but in some way it still looked homemade to him. Film posters papered the walls, making the space almost seem a bit childish compared to its otherwise mature décor.

Seated at the end of his bed, fully dressed and looking ready for the day, Jonathan sat peacefully gazing down into his lap as he fiddled with something that was out of Will’s line of sight. From where the boy stood in the open doorway into the room, Jonathan had his back facing him and the only indication of what his older brother was doing was the thin strap of Jonathan’s Pentax draped over his right leg.

The music poured into Will’s ears, drowning out any thoughts he could have been forming as his gaze roamed the room. As he stepped inside of Jonathan’s bedroom, Will felt thankful for the warmth of the carpeted floor against his bare feet. The older boy hadn’t yet noticed Will, and as the younger of the two brothers peered around the room in search of the music’s source, he spotted a solid black cassette

player sitting on top of Jonathan's dresser.

'In touch with the ground

I'm on the hunt down I'm after you

Smell like I sound I'm lost in a crowd

And I'm hungry like the wolf'

Will Byers crossed his brother's room in silence, slowly but surely padding across the carpet and staring into the face of Jonathan's cassette player. Curious eyes roamed the controls as though he was looking at some sort of science fiction device, and, as Will's eyes landed on the word 'volume' printed clearly in white colored text over a thick black dial, he noticed the subtle hesitation dwelling in the tips of his fingers.

Letting the sound smother him for a few more seconds, Will let his stance rock just slightly to the tempo of the music as he raised a thin hand, twisting the dial back so that it was just loud enough that he could still hear his own thoughts coursing through his brain. Out of the corner of his eye, Will could see Jonathan shift towards the cassette player quickly, as though he'd been zapped from the sudden volume change.

"Oh... hey, buddy," Jonathan spoke, his voice loud enough that he knew Will could hear him but not quite approaching a shout. He looked startled, as though he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't have been. In reality, as Will turned back towards his brother and peered over his shoulder, he could see rather clearly the inner workings of Jonathan's camera splayed open on his lap. In his

right hand, he clutched a wound roll of film.

“Hey, Jonathan,” Will mumbled in a tender voice, still returning to the real world after being unconscious for the night as he pushed a couple messy hairs away from his face. Turning back towards the dresser in which the cassette player was seated, Will’s eyes followed the spine of a lengthy stack of cassettes leaning against the side of the player, suddenly intrigued by the collection. None of the bands that were displayed in thick graphic text on the sides of the tape cases meant anything to Will, but he still reached out to pull a couple out, his gaze dancing across the covers as Jonathan spoke to him.

“I... I’m sorry, I probably woke you, didn’t I? I never sleep in on weekends,” the older boy murmured as he watched Will take in the small abundance of tapes that he had, tearing his eyes away after a few moments and returning his attention to the camera seated face down between his knees. Will clutched a single plastic case between his fingers as he glanced back over towards Jonathan, watching as his brother slid the fresh roll of film into his camera and pulled it forward, snapping the back door shut as he got it situated.

“No, it’s okay. I was hungry anyways,” Will suggested through a harmless white lie as he turned his gaze towards the cassette in his hand. From his position in front of the cassette player, Will shot a look over his shoulder before sizing up the front of the player once more.

“Jonathan?”

“Yeah?” Jonathan responded in quick succession, peeking over his shoulder at his younger brother. Will turned the tape over in his hand, his back to Jonathan once more.

“Can I try playing one?” he asked in a soft voice saturated with intrigue, reaching out and brushing his fingertips against its black plastic shell.

“Oh, yeah, of course. Just make sure you’re putting it in the right way, okay? It says on the tape,” Jonathan spoke passively, standing up from his spot on the edge of his bed and making his way to his desk, placing his camera on top and folding the strap up so that it sat directly alongside the camera’s body.

As Jonathan worked at tidying up the top of his desk, Will searched the front of the player and, once he honed in on the word ‘eject’ situated directly over a square button, he pressed the button in and watched as the tape that had been playing popped out abruptly, shooting the entire house into a thick quiet. It almost felt uncomfortable, as Will had grown used to the gentle hum that he could feel driving up through the floor and through his legs.

Glancing down at the tape in his grip, Will slid it into place with ease inside the cassette holder and pressed the small door shut once more. After a moment, the sudden sound of a guitar buzzed from inside of the speakers. Will’s brows flicked upwards as he listened to the drums kick in only moments after.

‘Darling you got to let me know

Should I stay or should I go?

If you say that you are mine

I'll be here 'til the end of time'

Will's fingertips found the edge of the dresser and he quickly picked up on the beat of the song, tapping his fingers softly along with the music as he peered down at the now empty cassette case in his hand. The splash of text that crossed the plastic read, in misshapen, radical font: *'The Clash'*.

"This is pretty good," Will said out loud, a small smile tugging at the boy's lips. As he turned back towards his brother, Will felt goose bumps rise on the backs of his upper arms. Whatever smile he had held quickly diminished as he saw Jonathan, his back no longer facing his younger brother. Instead, he'd turned away from his desk, eyeing the cassette player as though it had just let out a violent screech. He seemed almost like he was day dreaming, or like he was thinking incredibly hard about something he didn't want to remember.

"Jonathan?"

Hearing his name, Jonathan appeared to slip away from his dissociative state, blinking several times before tearing his eyes away from the system.

'So you got to let me know

Should I stay or should I go?'

"Hm..." Jonathan muttered, less in curiosity and more so a confirmation that he'd heard Will speaking to him. He seemed to dwell there for a moment, glancing downwards at the palms of his

hands as though there was something to be found there. Will watched his brother as worry coursed through him, unsure as to why he could feel a knot forming in his stomach, only knowing that something had struck him just then.

"Are you--" Will had begun to ask, but his words were cut off.

As Jonathan opened his mouth to say something else, the violent ring of an incoming call wafted through the hallway of the Byers' home and into Jonathan's open bedroom door.

Before Jonathan could pick himself up from the statue-like stance he'd taken on, Will was drifting out of the bedroom and escaping into the hall, ignoring the weak 'I'll get it' coming from his older brother and walking lightly towards their dining room. Strung up on the wall and attached only by a spiraling, pale yellow chord, Will gazed at the phone for only a beat before reaching out and snatching it off the receiver, glancing back down the hallway towards Jonathan's room. The boy hadn't bothered to come out and take the call instead, and for some strange reason, Will knew he wouldn't have anyways.

Something had drifted away from him in that moment, something distant and mournful drenched Jonathan in hurt, and as brief as it was, Will noticed.

Lifting the phone to his ear, Will wrapped a finger around it's chord.

"Hello?" Will muttered softly, only realizing how truly tired he sounded when he had nothing to focus on but his own voice.

"*Blue*, huh?" spoke an amused voice on the other end.

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Will felt his posture go stiff as he heard the voice on the opposite end of the line. Had the caller said anything other than such, Will might have had to ask who they were. But the way the caller's voice held a warm curiosity, a teasing manner that Will knew he shouldn't take offense to; he didn't need to ask who it was.

"Of all the things, a colour? You're pretty far off mark. I almost wanna' say it's cheating," Blue carried on from the other end of the line, his chides coming off almost daunting to Will. The boy pursed his lips as he listened.

"Cheating? It's not cheating!" Will grumbled in a semi-embarrassed fashion, letting himself lean slightly against the paneled wall as he pressed the phone closer to his ear.

"Wanna come over tonight?" Blue suggested casually, completely bypassing Will's denial as though he hadn't even spoke.

"Lucas and Dustin are staying over, too. We're gonna watch Cujo," he finished with a lilt on the film's title, and Will could practically imagine the look on Blue's face, as though he'd just announced the most socially appetizing thing ever to exist. Will wasn't quite sure what the film was about, as he couldn't remember hearing about it, but he felt a bit too embarrassed to ask.

"Like, for the night?"

“Yeah... unless you’ve got plans tomorrow, or something,” Blue spoke softly into the phone now, as though a sudden shyness had swept over him. A smile tugged at Will’s lips, and he placed his free hand against his opposite forearm. He knew that Joyce would have pushed for him to get out of the house and go out with his friends if she hadn’t gone to work so early, and, feeling safe in the fact that she would know where he is if he needed help, Will twisted back around, the phone cord wrapping around his hip as he peered up at the clock. He’d hardly been awake for 10 minutes.

“What time do you want me to come over?” Will asked slowly, watching as the seconds arm inside of their wall clock ticked by sluggishly. Cradling the phone between his shoulder and his ear, Will teetered off into the dining room as the cord trailed behind him. There was only a moment of silence before Blue spoke again, and Will could almost sense the excitement in the boy’s voice.

“As soon as you can.”

-

There were facts that Will had been told about who he was that didn’t seem right, and facts or interests that he couldn’t confirm but imagined would be true about himself, like being good at video games or being able to do crazy tricks with his tongue. Will discovered, after spending half of Saturday’s daylight with Dustin, Lucas and Blue, that one of those interests was the woods.

The boys had taken the long way through the forest towards the center of downtown, their only aim to spend the day shrouded in

neon flickering lights, listening to the gentle hum of electronics and competitive conversation from other local kids. They'd taken their bikes, with Will climbing onto the back of Lucas' and letting the other three boys lead the way out and through the semi overgrown pathway, and as the four of them whizzed past decaying stumps and patches of soft green moss, Will had realized just how quiet the forest was. He had tipped his head up towards the treetops and subconsciously gripped Lucas' shoulders just a little bit tighter, trusting the boy to take care of where they were going so not to tip them over as he gazed upwards.

Will had watched the trees fly past them at a speed that exceeded anything safe, but he didn't care. He felt his breathing begin to level, and he watched the clouds drift past them, taking advantage of the peace and solace that overtook him. For a moment, even if he didn't really notice it, Will Byers wasn't worried about anything. Not school, not his memories, not himself. It was just him, and his friends, and the trees.

For the first time since the accident, he felt like Will.

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By the time the boys had drifted out of the arcade and started their ride back out towards Blue's home, the sun had long since escaped below the horizon. Cool air poured down the exposed neck of Will's jacket, and he found himself grateful for the seemingly short ride as he had watched the end of the path grow closer and closer.

The boys had abandoned their bikes at the side of Blue's home, creeping inside of the house as silently as they could so not to wake any of the home's sleeping residents. Turning back towards the front

door as the rest of his friends walked tentatively into the main foyer, Will twisted the door's knob and gently pushed it into place to numb the sound of the door's bolts shifting into place.

Running a finger along the delicate detailing of the door's window, Will turned back towards his friends as he they drifted off towards the basement door. The house was dead silent, exempt for the gentle but barely noticeable creak of the boys' feet as they all descended the staircase into the bottom floor, Will's footfalls only a tad louder than the rest as he hurried after them.

It hadn't taken them long to set up the VCR player, the gentle hiss of the screen coming to life catching Will by surprise as he had tucked himself into one of the couches that faced the television. The static crackled and squealed for only a moment as Dustin had pressed a couple buttons along the bottom of the TV's frame, sending the screen into sheer, grainy blackness once more before the title screen popped up.

It didn't take Will long at all to start to drift off. He was surprised by how cathartic the hum of the TV was, a subtle white noise that was consistent enough to lull him towards sleep even in the wake of such horrific visuals on screen. Will could feel his eyes fluttering closed, heavy like a solid weight as he watched flashes of Cujo's frothy maw snap at the films protagonist through the thin barrier of a car window. Will wasn't entirely as freaked out by the film as his friends appeared to be, taking note of Dustin sitting on the floor with his back against the couch Will was curled up on, his stance reminiscent of a fight or flight reaction.

In bitterness and through the lack of ability to do so with his own memory, Will could separate what was a real threat and what wasn't through film, or at least likeliness. He could look into the snapping

jaws of the rabid dog and understand that something like that was incredibly unlikely to happen, and if anything, it was even less likely that it could happen in Hawkins. The town didn't exactly sport a large Bernese Mountain Dog population.

So Cujo wasn't scary to him, or not as scary as it was to his friends.

Cujo wasn't the source of his nightmare that evening, his fingers twitching as his head turned from side to side in the black emptiness that was the Blue's basement. His nightmare reached out and took reigns over something that Will had previously found comfort in, something with limbs stretching upwards into the sky and the familiar scent of pine.

That night, Will dreamt about the woods.

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He'd been walking through the woods that the boys had been biking through earlier that same day, but he wouldn't have known that. They looked almost entirely different, warped with pathways that resembled fading scratches through the foliage that were almost devoid of direction.

Around him, snowflakes drifted down through the leafless branches of the trees almost in slow motion, even more delicately than they fell in real life. Will didn't know which way he was going, or what way he wanted to go.

He only knew that he didn't recognize this place, that it only seemed to exist to terrify him.

He had nowhere to go, only twisting and turning either way in an attempt to search for something he could recognize. From somewhere in the distance, a warped voice called out, provoking Will to stop in his tracks and listen, the pale sneakers on his feet digging into the thick, de-saturated moss he was standing on.

Will.

The boy froze, his eyes growing wide as he heard his own name shouted through the void, a thick fog that hovered around him preventing him from seeing too far into the distance. As Will attempted to take a step forward, his leg was restrained, and, looking down at his shoes, Will noticed the thick, scratchy branches that seemed to retain a life of their own, wrapping upwards around his ankles.

Will.

As the voice called out once more, Will couldn't bring himself to look for it as he desperately tried to yank his feet out of the grip of the roots. They only tightened, and though some part of Will knew he was dreaming, he could almost swear he could feel thorns digging into his exposed skin, sending vicious bouts of pain up through his calves.

Fear bubbled up inside of him, and with nothing else to do but struggle, Will let out what he expected to be an ear piercing scream. No sound came from his throat.

Will.

Will?

WILL?

-

“Will?”

Will awoke with a violent gasp, his right hand shooting up to grip at his chest as his eyes flew open. He was greeted with nothing but thick darkness, his head twisting around violently as he searched for something to identify where he was. As his gaze settled on the small window at the top of the closest wall to him, Will eyed the soft light that was coming in, reflecting onto the back of the TV that set in front of him. His heart thudded hard in his chest, and as he sat up only slightly in an attempt to help himself breathe better, Will noticed the feeling of somebody else's hand on his forearm.

“Will?”

From just below him on the floor, Will could hear Blue croak out his name, as though he'd just awoke from a deep sleep with the worst sore throat of his life. The boy's hand slid off of Will's arm after a moment, and Will flinched.

“I'm.... I'm fine,” Will whispered, almost unsure of his own words as he stared down into the darkness. He couldn't make out Blue's face in

the dark, but he didn't really need to. He could hear Blue let out a slow exhale.

"Good," the boy murmured, the gently sound of him shifting accompanied by soft sniffles leading Will to believe that he had turned over towards him. Will cleared his throat and leaned back a bit into the couch a bit, tucking himself into the material. Peering down towards where Will imagined Blue was laying, he found himself opening his mouth to speak.

"Are *you*?"

The rustling from the blankets Blue must have had fell silent, as though he'd been caught off guard by something. After a moment, he let out another soft sniff and cleared his throat as quietly as he could.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just... getting a cold, I think. Don't get too close," Blue muttered with a faint, half hearted laugh as Will turned his head upwards at the ceiling. The two of them fell silent for several minutes, and Will had fully assumed that Blue had drifted back into unconscious bliss, his own eyes starting to drift closed once more until Blue spoke again.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Will's eyes fluttered open, greeted by nothingness once more as his heart rate slightly picked up, an almost universal reaction to such a question.

“Yeah... sure,” Will whispered, almost regretting his response before Blue even got a chance to ask his question.

“What’s it like?” Blue spoke in return, his voice even more hushed than it needed to be.

Blue didn’t need to explain what he meant.

Will pressed his tongue hard against the back of his teeth, shutting his eyes as he let the boy’s question sit for a couple seconds. What did it feel like? It felt like a lot of things. It was only then that Will understood that he was afraid. Truly, unequivocally afraid of not knowing.

“It’s like... when you have a dream, and you can’t remember it unless you think really hard,” Will began slowly, as though he was measuring out his feelings as he spoke. Visuals of trees and demonic roots wrapping around his entire body violated his brain. His throat felt as though it was seizing up as he spoke, and Will hadn’t realized that he’d started crying until a hot tear dripped down the side of his face towards his ear. “It’s like that. All the time. Except I can’t ... I can’t seem to remember, no matter how badly I want to,” Will whispered, trying to contain the subtle break in his voice as he lifted a hand, wiping away the tears that had dampened his cheeks as though they were an offense to his being. A silence filled the room, as though Will had been talking to the air around him the entire time. Turning over towards the inside of the couch, Will stared blankly at the back of the chesterfield, pursing his lips as though that might keep them from trembling as they were. Blue had gone completely silent, only his breathing confirming his presence. He sniffled once, not speaking for several seconds.

“Will?”

“What?” Will exhaled sharply, a subtle sharpness to his tone that hadn’t been there before. He had his arms tucked around himself firmly, as though any sort of embrace might do him better. Blue went quiet for another moment, as though he was thinking.

“You’re still my best friend, you know,” Blue announced in a whisper, so abrupt that Will twisted a bit to look back towards the darkness where Blue laid, even if he knew he couldn’t see the boy before him. The only noise that Will could hear between the two was the soft tap of a tear rolling off of his ear and onto the couch beneath him.

“Wh---“

“Even if you can’t remember who I am,” Blue continued, his voice so soft spoken Will could have mistaken him for someone younger. He sounded honest, and something about the tone of his voice was raw.

“Even if you can’t remember, you’re still my favorite person. You’re still my favourite.” Blue let out a few soft sniffles as the shuffling of his blankets began once more, twisting around to face away from Will in an attempt to go back to sleep, Will assumed.

Part of Will knew, however, whether he wanted to think about it whether he wanted to bury it deep in his mind, that Blue wasn’t sick, and he wasn’t congested. His sniffing wasn’t caused by a sudden allergic outburst, or pet fur. When Will had arrived earlier on, the boy had been breathing fine as though he’d never inhaled anything but fresh air. Will knew, in the blinding darkness that encased the four of them, Blue was likely laying awake, still as a statue next to

him, eyes staring absently upwards at the ceiling or crushed shut like a child stubbornly refusing to look at something scary.

Will knew, if he reached out and, through fumbling and misguided fingertips, he touched Blue's face, his cheeks wouldn't be dry.

For the next few hours as Will desperately tried to erase the images that had stained the backs of his eyelids, Blue never stopped sniffing.

5. mirkwood

Notes for the Chapter:

Just a quick warning before the chapter starts: this chapter does include violence. I wouldn't go as far as to say it's graphic, but it is a bit descriptive. Thanks for the support you've given so far for this fic, and here is the chapter!

As he had woken up that following Sunday morning after a full evening of fictional rabid dogs and the soft beeps and glitchy sound effects that filled the arcade in town, Will Byers had risen from the couch he'd been sleeping on with a sore back and a subconscious worry for his dark haired best friend. He didn't have the gall to question why Blue had been awake at such an early hour in the morning, but then again, Will wouldn't have wanted Blue to ask him about his nightmares either.

Regardless of whether Will was actively thinking about the nightmare he'd had or not, the dark images seemed to continue to plague him in the daylight. Joyce had come to get him not too late that morning, and even as Will had watched Blue's home drift off further and further as the car pulled down the street and out of sight, the boy could still imagine those twisting, violent roots and branches, crawling upwards and wrapping around his calves and knees with the strength of forty men.

Will imagined, if Blue hadn't woken him up when he did, that he would have been swallowed whole by the forest in no time. He usually abandoned the thought quickly once he got to that point, his gaze roaming around his surroundings in search of something else to think about. Will couldn't have imagined that his nightmare was anything more than just that; temporary and imaginary and nothing to be afraid of. It was imaginary, only a mere violation of his brain's unconscious sense of peace. There was one thing the boy was wrong

about: it was most definitely not temporary, and as Will poured through the first half of the next week, drifting in and out of consciousness in his classes from the lack of sleep, the nightmare would follow him, dancing across the backs of his eyelids like tattooed violence.

That following Wednesday, Will had trudged out of his house like a zombie, running on an unacceptable amount of sleep, if any at all. Every joint in his body felt stiff like his limbs had been pried off and reattached while he was sleeping, and the soft tint underneath his eyes confirmed the restless nights he'd been experiencing. It almost seemed like as Will approached the finish of his second full week of being home, Blue was growing a bit more open, a bit less physically exhausted and soft spoken whereas Will seemed to be turning inwards, growing more tired by the day.

He hadn't had the heart to bring up the night before to Blue when he had climbed the stairs that morning to find the boy pouring himself a bowl of cereal. He looked well rested, oddly enough, as Will hadn't fallen asleep until the light outside had started to grow brighter, and even then, enough light had begun to dribble into the basement that Will could see the gentle trembling of Blue's shoulders. Will hadn't had the heart to ask him that following morning how he was feeling, or if he had really been crying. He hadn't had the heart to do anything about the situation, knowing very well that if he was in Blue's place, he would have wanted to be left alone. That was Will's problem, as he laid and stared at Blue's back, remaining still as though he was frozen stiff: he wasn't Blue.

Yet through the week, he continued to feel like he was draining. There was nobody to blame for this but Will, and he knew that. He only wanted the nightmares to stop, like some part of him felt as though they weren't just meaningless dreams. His anger, his hurt, his confusion and his lack of knowing seemed to grow into something on it's own. Will had remained silent for the majority of the drive to

school that late Thursday morning as Jonathan has pulled the family car up to the school's front curb, overlooking the front lawn and watching the students clamoring in from the parking lot, towards the front doors.

At this point, Will thought, who was to blame for the way he was feeling? His dreams were dreams and nothing more, but the forest lived inside of him, vines and roots climbing up around his lungs as the days went by and he couldn't remember. Could he even blame himself any more? He could, and he would, but was it really the right thing to do?

Will hadn't given Jonathan a mere moment to question him about why he'd been so quiet the entire morning, before he'd hopped out of the car only a split second after it stopped. He could see that Jonathan had been debating whether to ask, his brows knit tight as he stared ahead of the road like he could sense Will's energy from a mile away. He'd opened his mouth to say something as Will had climbed out of the passengers seat, but the boy had shut the door too quickly for anything to be said, sparing a wave to Jonathan as he turned away from the car. Truly, he wasn't in the mood that morning to talk in general, let alone talk about how tired he seemed to be.

Mentally hyping himself up, if only to persuade him to actually walk into the school building, Will reached up and pulled his backpack taught against his back by the straps as he walked along the pavement leading up towards the two front doors at the front of the structure. Will scanned the front lawn of the school property, taking note of the fact that, even more so after Jonathan's car pattered easily out of the drop off area, the entirety of the property seemed to be empty after the sudden but brief rush of students. Will hadn't bothered to check the clock before he had left that morning, not being too distressed to get there on time as he didn't have the energy to spend worrying about it. All he knew was that he only needed to get through a few hours, and he would be on his way towards Blue's

home to see him. If anything had prompted him to get out of bed that morning, it was the feeling of looking forward to that.

Checking the clock was something he was going to have to get used to now, Will thought grimly to himself, as he trudged slowly down the sidewalk. He'd made the decision, a spur of the moment one at that, to ask his mom to call in and tell the school he would be back to regular classes by the beginning of that week. He was regretting this now, letting Lucas and Blue drag him half asleep down the hallway to their classes for the past several days, and relying on them to keep him from knocking his head on the desk should he drift off into the palm of his hand. He could see the worry in Lucas' eyes when Will found himself falling asleep, unable to control the sheer exhaustion that took over his entire body. He knew that Lucas wouldn't ask unless provoked, however: it was Blue that Will was a bit more worried about. He wouldn't hesitate to tell him he seemed off. Oh, didn't he know it, though.

The first two weeks were almost over, and they'd gone by at the speed of light to the boy. His own thoughts caved and shifted every single day, as he tried to figure out what he had done and who he had been, who his friends were. He was finally beginning to feel like he knew them, *really* knew them, if not the way that he did before, incredible close to it. He had spent the past couple lunches with the three of them all together, listening to them tell stories of the things the party, as they liked to call it, used to get up to in their spare time. They told Will stories of campaigns that took them days to complete, of days spent at the arcade and in town and messing around in the woods like a bunch of troublemakers.

There were plenty of stories about how docile they could be as well: spending entire days in the summer just sitting inside, watching movies and talking about idiots in their class, neglecting the idea that they only had a limited amount of time before school would come back to bite them.

These sounded beautiful, desirable to Will, and his heart yearned to remember these times as well as his friends did. He felt more like he was watching their stories on a television screen, not quite there but close enough to touch it, to feel the joy second hand. Any feeling that he had harboured before, anything ill towards his friends and the idea that they didn't fit into the picture of what Will Byers was to him; he took them back, fully. He couldn't imagine himself being with anyone else. He couldn't imagine being friends with anyone better, and as he spent more time in Blue's presence, the boy began to grow on him as well.

Will hadn't expected his mind to change, but something about Blue sat right with him. He felt safe when he was around him, like nothing bad could really happen if Will stuck by him. He imagined that, before his accident, the two of them must have been thick as thieves.

Whether he wanted to admit it or not, what Lucas had said in passing fit inside of Will's mind like a puzzle piece.

In some weird, unexplainable way, Blue *wasn't* like them.

As Will pushed open the two front doors and stepped inside of the main hallway, the only thing the boy could focus on was just how silent the school seemed to be. There was the ever so subtle chatter from the first door to his right, slightly cracked as though the last student entering had forgotten to pull it closed, but that was the only sound that graced Will's ears as he stepped into the foyer. The door thudding shut behind him practically boomed through the empty framework of the hallway, causing Will's shoulders to tense only for a moment as he crept inside. As he took careful note of his footing, the

boy reached back and pulled his backpack off of his shoulders, feeling around for the zipper and, once his fingers found it, taking a hold of it, unzipping his bag and reaching a hand in.

Once his fingertips grazed the paper that he was searching for, Will yanked it out of his bag and slung the half open knapsack back up onto his shoulder, unfolding the slip and staring down at it. It didn't seem to matter the amount of times he'd already seen his classrooms; it was going to take him a while to fully remember where they were. As his gaze crossed over the word 'Mathematics', Will spotted the number 'R104' placed rightfully beneath it, taking note of the fact that the room was on the same floor that he was. No need to go hunting, as if he wasn't already late enough. Will glanced between the two hallways stemming from the main hall up ahead of him, his only other option besides those being the staircase at the end. Ignoring the stairs, Will approached one of the hallways and peered down it curiously, like he was making a decision that was incredibly pertinent. In a way, it was: he could practically see his teacher's frustration with him in meter form, a little dial that went from a pale yellow to a harsh red. The hand on the metaphorical dial inched closer to red the longer Will took and, with that being his only solid motivation not to bail out and just spend the rest of the class in the library by himself, he began down the right side hallway, eyeing each of the doors to make sure that he was going the right way.

As the first door approached, Will noticed the number '117' engraved into a small back plaque that hung on the hard wood surface. The boy continued his walk down the hallway until he crossed yet another door, this one reading '115'. With a slow, easy sigh, Will picked up his pace as much as he could and carried on down the hallway with the knowledge that he was indeed going the right way. His legs felt like they might give out from underneath him, his exhaustion paired with the absolute disinterest in learning anything that early in the morning begging him to turn around and go somewhere else. Will knew, however, that he couldn't ignore it forever. It wouldn't do him any good. Hell, it wouldn't do his friends any good to be worrying about him.

If anything, putting someone else in priority gave Will a little bit more incentive. He didn't know where such an awful habit had come from, though deep down he knew he must have been thinking the way he did for a while now. He seemed to put absolutely everybody else before him, whether he was doing it knowingly or not he was never really sure. If he couldn't make himself go to class for his own benefit, he would go for his friends. He would go so they wouldn't worry, so they wouldn't question him too much.

He knew he should care for himself more, but as everything around him slowly began to settle into place, he still felt like the framework of an abandoned house, misplaced and decaying and unsure of every part of himself. He wanted to be Will, he wanted to be who he had been. As Will tugged his sleeves down over the palms of his hands, goose bumps tickling his arms from the early winter chill outdoors, it seemed like no matter how hard he tried to grasp at his old memories, they seemed to slip away from him. He didn't really know how else to explain it, except that it was torturous. That was it, though, wasn't it? He wasn't just tired, maybe that was just half of it. He was sad. He was lost somewhere, trying to claw his way out. Maybe the forest really had trapped him, and he hadn't even known it.

As Will Byers continued down the hallway towards the classroom he was looking for, he finally pinpointed it. Torture. It felt like torture.

He wanted the nightmares to stop. He wanted himself back.

As Will approached a blind turn in the hallway, he could hear a couple of voices breaking the silence from ahead of him. There were just muffled enough by the thick divider that jutted out from the

otherwise flat wall to Will's left, and so he continued on rather carelessly, his feet dragging only slightly as he walked. As he rounded the corner, Will lifted his sleepy eyes from his stare down towards the polished floor beneath him to look upwards for the door he was searching for. Had Will been in a cartoon, something like Looney Tunes, a violent, gimmicky screech would have echoed through the hallways as he froze in place.

Up ahead of him, no more than several metres away, was a familiar face that Will would have been happy to have never seen again. Particularly alone.

Troy was walking in the opposite direction that Will was headed, getting closer with every second that the boy didn't move. He had his head down, his dark eyes pointed towards the floor, but as he lifted his gaze and noticed Will standing there like a deer caught in the headlights, any sense of his boredom on Troy's face shifted into pure, wicked entertainment.

Kicking himself into gear, Will blinked himself back into the present and whipped around to break into a run, energy creeping up on him like he hadn't been entirely down trodden only a moment before. Any thoughts in his brain that had been passing through before had been completely eradicated by one, definite goal; he needed to get out of there. He would have, too. If when he had turned around, he hadn't run directly into what he had initially thought was a solid brick wall, but was actually the thick, tall body of the boy that Troy seemed to always have slinking around next to him.

Strong, large hands grabbed Will by the upper arms, and before he could yell or wriggle out of the grasp, he felt his feet shoot out from underneath him as he was shoved down onto the rock hard linoleum floor. Will let out a gasp as though he'd had the air knocked right out

of him, a violent but passing pain shooting up his back as he landed directly on his butt. From behind him, he could hear an enthusiastic cackle from Troy.

“Byers! There you are!” the boy’s sharp tone announced from behind Will’s back, prompting him to whip his head around and stare in poorly hidden worry up at Troy. Will took the moment to ease himself up onto his feet, shooting his gaze consistently between the two of them in case they thought it would be best to knock him down once more. His knees nearly gave underneath him, his stance only slightly wobbly as he searched every crevice that the two boys had left between them and their respective directions that might let Will get out. He needed to get out. He knew one thing in that moment was true, and it was that.

“Leave me alone,” Will hissed in passing as his eyes became slightly frantic, head turning either way in search of an exit, aiming to have sounded a little more intimidating than the panicky whimper that escaped his lips. Troy had begun to approach him now, only a couple inches taller than Will but enough that he seemed to loom over the boy in that moment.

As Troy grew closer, practically less than a foot away from Will now, Will peered past Troy’s shoulder like he was a ghost, taking note of the now empty hallway that he could easily make a break for. That he knew he should make a break for.

“What was that?”

“I said... leave... me *alone!*” Will urged through gritted teeth, not even bothering to look Troy in the face as he jolted, flinging himself forward at a speed that Will didn’t think he could possibly reach. He

was unable to look towards anything else but the open hall, his one chance at getting out of there before anything could happen to him. He would go to Blue's after school and he would get to class before they could reach him and he would be totally fine, at least for another day. That was enough though.

That was what Will wanted to happen, and he willed it to be so. But as he felt a hand clutch at the hem of his jacket, he knew he wasn't going anywhere in that moment. His vision of peace shattered before him as he was torn away from his hopes, stumbling back only slightly from the yank that Troy had given him to keep him from going anywhere. He was willing to put up with humiliation if he got out of it quick, he didn't care. He only wanted out.

His hopes for something passing crumbled as Troy reared back and threw a solid blow directly into Will's right cheek, his face ripe with agony.

Will realized then, even with the obscurity that surrounded his memory, that he was certain he'd never been punched in the face before. He was certain that he hadn't and, through the hot blast of pain that surged through the entire right side of his face, he was certain he didn't want to experience it again.

Will had teetered back and fallen onto his butt once more, this time the ache from his tailbone couldn't even compare to the throbbing electric sensation that splattered up through his cheekbone and ear. A gentle ring droned inside of Will's eardrum. He let out a choked gasp, reaching a hand up to touch the spot where he had been struck. His fingers were immediately met with a sluggish dampness, and a whole new sense of panic awakened in Will's stomach; blood. Through the ringing in his right ear, Will could hear the voice of Troy's accomplice, only slightly muted but loud enough that he could hear

the hesitance that cloaked his voice, like maybe he was realizing that this wasn't a good idea. It didn't seem to matter though; Troy was standing in front of Will once more before he could take a moment to remember his surroundings.

He only caught the glimpse of blushed red knuckles, a flash of a terrifying image before he felt yet another heavy blow, this time to the front of his face, pain skyrocketing up towards the bridge of his nose and through his upper lip. Will could have thrown up in that moment from the fear he was experiencing, twisting his head away and raising an arm as though he was trying to shield himself. He knew he must have looked pathetic, but he didn't even care.

As Troy grabbed a hold of his arm, trying to pry it down as he shouted something into the momentarily deaf side of Will's face, Will didn't really care how he looked. He wanted someone to help him. He *needed* it.

"Hey! What the *hell* do you think you're doing?"

Will could barely hear the unfamiliar voice through the pounding in his ears, his eyes squeezed shut like he was terrified to see the sight in front of him. Only mere milliseconds after the unfamiliar shout, Will felt the collar of his jacket loosening as Troy released it, followed by the thundering of footsteps as the two boys tore off down the hallway. He could feel the pulse of his veins pumping in every inch of his face, and the taste of iron tainted the boy's tongue as he pressed it against his slowly swelling upper lip. His eyes flickered open, squinting as though he was expecting another blow to be coming his way. Instead, the soft, aged face of an elderly teacher was in his sights. The older man was crouched down in front of him, offering Will out a hand.

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Everything in the following hour had felt like a slow blur, his head still throbbing as though someone had taken a jackhammer to the side of his face. No matter how intensely he had begged for the office not to call home, they had done so without any hesitation. In a last ditch attempt when there had been no answer after several tries, Will had persuaded them to call his older brother at Hawkins High, having enough in him to convince them that his mother was out of town.

The only consolation of this was that Will knew Joyce was at work, and maybe, just maybe, Jonathon would think to let Will talk his piece before telling her about this.

When the car had practically tore into the school parking lot, Will had climbed lazily into the passenger seat, a small package of ice pressed to the quickly darkening bruise beneath his right eye. He had only caught a glimpse of Jonathan's face, but it was enough for Will: he looked like he was about to burst into tears, staring into Will's face like it had been 50 years since he'd last seen him.

"What happened?" Jonathan had asked in an almost muted whisper, an attempt at sounding calm when he was everything but.

He shifted the car into drive and began to pull out of the parking lot, and Will stared into the passenger mirror, getting a glimpse at the state of his face for the first time since he'd been beaten. He hadn't thought his face was so delicate, but the mirror confirmed it for him: a thick, purple bruise was slowly deepening beneath his right bottom

eyelid, paired with a thin split in right side of his upper lip, dried blood tainting his pale pink lips. He looked an entire mess, and he wasn't sure if the blood on his mouth had been from the nose bleed he'd gotten or the cut itself. He didn't care. Blood was blood, and as he stared into the mirror at his roughed up face, the sight of the mirror grew blurrier, tears dripping onto his cheeks.

"I'm still going," Will whispered in response, entirely blocking out Jonathan's question as he let his head rest carefully against the window pane. He didn't need to explain.

Without question, Jonathan had pulled out onto the main road, heading towards the direction of their home.

Will hadn't realized just how similar Blue and his older sister, Nancy, looked until he had knocked on their front door that afternoon, his cheeks long dry from the lengthy, well needed nap that he had taken when he had gotten home late that morning. Will had reassured Jonathan that he would be fine going over to Blue's, that he would just spent the afternoon with Blue playing games in the basement or something delicate like that and he would explain his face to Joyce when he got home.

It had taken a bit of convincing for Jonathan to let him leave, but eventually the older boy gave in, leaving Will with an affectionate squeeze, letting him know to be ready by 9:30. His car had pulled slowly out of the cul-de-sac, as though he was dwindling and making sure Will was going to be safe, but by the time Will had reached the front porch, Jonathan's car had disappeared from sight. The cool November air blew against his pale complexion, sharp like the crack

of a whip against his bruised face. Around him, snowflakes drifted down towards the ground like they were lighter than air itself. It likely wouldn't build up to badly, no more than a foot, Will imagined, but he could dream.

Will had hurried down the lawn towards the front door of the home and placed several sharp knocks on the door, drawing his coat tighter around his chest as he stared at the smooth wooden surface in front of him. Thinking about having to explain his appearance to Blue made him physically cringe, but he knew he would have to do it eventually. It was the idea of the act that made him shiver. It had only been a couple seconds before the doorknob twisted, slowly but surely yanked open from the inside.

"Blu— oh."

A pair of crystal blue eyes peered back at him through the opening in the door, the crack widening until Nancy was leaning against the edge of the door, keeping her hand perched on the knob. Her gaze widened as she took a good, long look at Will's face, causing the boy's cheeks to flush a brighter red, even in the cold.

"Will," Nancy spoke quietly, as though his appearance on their doorstep shocked her deeply. The boy knew, however, she was reacting to his face more so than his presence.

"He, uh... he just left," the young girl continued, causing Will to pause as he was rubbing his hand against the sleeve of his jacket in an attempt to make himself even warmer. Left? Blue had known that he was coming over after school. Pressing his tongue against the back of his teeth, Will opened his mouth to speak, but Nancy continued with her sentence before he could.

“—He just went out into the woods for a bit, out back. If you want, you can just come in and wait...” Nancy suggested, her gaze clearly not centered on Will’s eyes, but rather on the shiny bruise underneath it. Will felt like his throat was closing, praying that he wouldn’t have to explain himself more times than he needed to.

“U-uh, n-no, that’s alright...” Will had said through a gentle shiver, sliding his chilled fingers into his pockets as he glanced out towards the corner of the front of the house. “I’ll just go catch up with him. Thanks, though,” Will had said in a subtly rushed tone, taking off of the doorstep before she could question him any further.

His sneakers squished only slightly against the semi-frozen grass as he rounded the side of the house and peered out back towards the woods. From where he was standing, Will could see the dip of a manmade path sliding down into the woods behind it, not yet covered by the light snowfall. Clenching his fists inside his pockets as if that would build up the heat inside his jacket quicker, Will hurried down towards the path and peered down into it, slowing himself only a bit to take in his surroundings as he descended into the woods.

Everything looked identical, as though there were really no defining markers to let Will know where he was going. The only thing that he could keep himself on track with was his footprints, showing up in the thin layer of snow that had already begun to build. Will kept his eyes on the treetops above him, checking his footing every once in a while to make sure he wasn’t going to be tripping over anything. Until he had some sort of idea where Blue had gone, the snow having started likely just after he’d left his home, Will took pleasure in the quiet of the woods.

“Blue?”

Will called out gently, not a scream but loud enough that anyone within close proximity could hear him. The sky hadn't yet gotten dark, but the clouds overhead had begun to dim, even in the early evening hours; Will's least favourite part of the winter. As the boy continued down through the path, he turned his gaze upwards once more, staring up at the snowflakes as they blew ever so delicately against his rosy cheeks. He felt lost in the moment, if only for a little while, taking in the breathtaking view as he watched the snow fall. The flakes seemed to pick up pace for a while, most definitely not a full blown storm but more than a light dusting. Will didn't seem to mind, however: the cold soothed the heat that radiated from his wounds.

When Will had looked back down after walking for quite a bit, however, he realized he wasn't where he had expected to be.

Turning his gaze downwards towards the forest floor, Will's sleepy gaze grew wide as he realized he'd been trampling over soft patches of moss and jagged twigs for what probably racked up to several minutes. He'd completely strayed from the path, which wasn't entirely a big deal, he'd thought, until he turned back towards the way he'd come. The snow really had picked up, dotting his eyelashes and burying his hair in a light shaking of white as it had completely repaired any indents that Will's boots had made behind him.

“Blue?”

His own voice sounding a little bit foreign to himself, Will whipped around to the direction that he had been walking in. He couldn't see much except for the thick brown trunks of the trees surrounding him,

and the thick snow that was falling down to the ground around him. Will hadn't even realized, until he had stopped and taken a good long moment to think about where he'd teetered off to, that his breathing had started to hitch, his heart thudding against his chest. No direction seemed familiar, everything a replica of the areas surrounding it. Fear struck him like an arrow directly through the heart.

He was lost.

The forest felt like it was almost closing in on him, even if he knew no such thing was possible. Fingers grasping as his jacket like he was holding on for dear life, Will twisted frantically around, trying to figure out which way he had came. Stepping out of the patchy moss he had been standing in, Will's footing gave out beneath him as the moss detached itself from its rooted base. The boy let out a yelp of surprise as he collided with the soft dirt beneath him, the slip not causing him any excess physical pain as he pressed his fingertips into the snow, the cold tickling his nerves like a live wire. He was lost. He was lost and he couldn't breathe and his heart was hammering against his chest like the engine of a freight train going at full speed.

He was lost. He was lost and he had no idea which way he had came or which way he should go.

As Will stared down into the snow that he had collapsed in, for the second time that afternoon, he could feel his eyes brimming with tears. His vision began to blur, to go wobbly as he let the tears drip into the snow beneath his gaze. Had he discovered another, less desirable fact about himself that evening? In one way or another, Will Byers was a cry baby. Will Byers was a cry baby and an empty slate and Will Byers had no sense of direction. He was going to die out there, some part of him said.

He was going to die.

From behind Will, shaking him violently out of his trance and bringing him back to the moment he was in, footsteps crunched on top of the discarded branches that laid on the forest floor.

“Will?”

6. swing set

Summary for the Chapter:

i know our lil boy has been going through some tough stuff, so why not give him a little love and appreciation? this is a soft chapter bc it's much needed. enjoy :-)

Within a matter of seconds, Will had gone from completely chilled, fingertips flushing a vicious pink from the direct contact with the snow, to enveloped in a warmth he never wanted to be released from. At the sound of someone calling his name, Will hadn't bothered to move for several seconds as though he expected the voice to just go away. He thought maybe he was imagining things, the panic that was coursing through the blood in his veins causing him to hear voices he knew very well were not there. But as the crunch of footsteps grew closer, what had been a slow tread quickly picking up into a light footed jog, Will knew he couldn't have just been hearing things. As Will pressed a hand deeper into the snow to push himself up onto his hands and knees, he nearly jumped out of his skin as a hand grabbed at his shoulder, drawing him back into an embrace that gave his frigid nerves only a second to relax. The familiar scent of pine and cinnamon greeted Will's senses like an old friend, and even if only for a moment, he felt calm. Drawing back from the embrace just as quickly as they'd entered, the being spoke.

“Will? Are you okay?”

Through the familiar ring the voice held, it dawned on Will just who was standing behind him. In the moment, he had nearly reached up to slap at whatever was grabbing him, throat prepared to let out a childish shriek. Will twisted around and fell back onto his butt for only a moment, ignoring the snow that sent chills up through his light coloured jeans as he gazed up into the familiar set of chocolate brown eyes staring concernedly down at him.

Will's vision, black dots framing his sight like the view was somewhat picturesque, settled on the boy in front of him, the pounding heart beat inside of his ears beginning to slow, or pick up? He wasn't exactly sure. He knew he should feel a bit embarrassed for the predicament he appeared to be in, but in that moment, Will was soothed by the sight of *him*.

Blue had one hand on his left knee, half covering what Will imagined was a tear in the knee of his corduroy pants from extensive wear, or being a bit too careless while out biking. His hair was tucked behind his ears hastily, not keeping well as the dampness from the snowflakes falling down upon them brought a subtle curl out in the boy's hair. He was wrapped up inside a warm looking tartan winter coat, crouched down slightly so that he could look Will directly in the face as he surveyed him like a concerned mother, hand still clamped onto the boy's shoulder.

As Will stared directly back into Blue's face, he could have sworn the freckles on his cheeks had gotten darker from the cool air. It took Will only a brief moment to realize he had been holding his breath, tears still dotting his cheeks relentlessly.

"I'm oka—" Will had begun to respond, his voice a raw croak like he'd been suffering a sore throat for weeks. He knew it was only from crying all that morning, and that only made him more embarrassed. He imagined he must have been lit up like Times Square at that point. Before he had a chance to finish his reassurance, Blue's grip on his shoulder eased.

"Your face."

Will's gaze tore away from Blue the moment he saw the boy's eyes change, the light that seemed to dance around his gaze shifting to something of brief anger, even hurt. For a moment, Will had thought with great surprise, Blue had looked like he might cry. His thin jaw squared as he tensed, staring directly into Will's face as his eyes danced across the soft bruises that tinted Will's cheeks. Will had opened his mouth once more to assure Blue that he was, however untrue the statement was, okay, and that he would be entirely fine as long as they got back to Blue's home and into about 30 layers of blankets.

"I—"

Before Will could continue his sentence once more, he was choked off by the sudden touch of warm fingertips against his upper lip. He didn't have the heart to wince from the subtle flicker of pain, practically able to feel his face flooding with a hot, pink blush.

Why? He was almost sure it was from the embarrassment of Blue seeing his bruises, seeing the physical manifestation of his loss to Troy. His dotted vision had grown subtler until he could see clearly once more, but his heart still hammered in his chest to no end. Blue touched the small cut that grazed Will's upper lip, his eyes filled with a bitter fire that Will couldn't imagine ever resting upon the boy's face. It was an aged look, a look of a distressed parent or a seasoned being, not a look that seemed like it would belong on the face of any thirteen-year-old boy, let alone his best friend.

"Come on. Let's go home."

Blue's fingers had dropped from Will's lips just as quickly as he had touched them, and the boy let his hand fall to his side only briefly

before offering it out to help Will up to his feet. Not daring to say no, Will reached a hand out and grabbed onto Blue, steadying himself as the boy pulled him up to a stand. Though his cheeks were already damp enough, Will wiped at them with frozen, wet hands, at least deciding to fake an explanation as to why his cheeks weren't dry before he could be questioned about it. Will took no time in trailing after Blue, almost reaching out to grab onto him for safety but deciding to keep his hands firmly at his sides.

"You, uh... you should see the other guy," Will spoke slowly, an attempt at making light of his appearance falling short as he built the courage once more to look up at Blue, taking note of the steely look in the boy's dark eyes as he gazed forward through the trees. He seemed to know exactly where he was going, lowering his head and letting his eyelids droop as he kicked a patch of snow in front of them, a tiny curl drifting down from the weakly kept back bunches behind his ears. He seemed to consider the snow at his feet for a moment before peering over the collar of his jacket at Will.

He hadn't realized he'd been staring until he felt the need to shoot his eyes away.

"Do I need to ask who did that to you?" Blue spoke quietly, as though his words were meant for Will to hear and Will only. Will watched in subdued silence as he could see Blue's breath drift upwards from behind the collar of his jacket, dissipating into the breeze as snowflakes flew in a barrage against their coats. He held an air about him that Will hadn't seen before, or at least, that he couldn't remember seeing: a quiet sense of anger or betrayal that Will knew he couldn't blame himself for. It wasn't the act of having these bruises tainting his skin, but rather the situation that had given him his battle wounds. Will pressed the tips of his fingers into the palms of his hands as though this would help warm them up quicker, averting his eyes down as he considered his response.

“Do I *need* to tell you?” Will offered as he watched his boots sink only slightly into the building snow that traced the direction they were walking in. Part of him wondered if he was really that wrapped up in making sure he didn’t slip or fall again, or if he was just avoiding any sort of eye contact that might give him away. Thinking about the experience, even as brief as it had been, made Will’s heart begin to kick into overdrive once more, and he actively had to drive the thoughts out of his mind to keep himself from going into a state of panic all over again.

From beside him, as he stared down into the blinding white sheet they were traipsing through, Will heard Blue let out a sigh. Peering over at Blue, his eyes barely peeking over the top of the collar of his jacket, Will noticed that he had his fists balled up as well.

Likely for entirely different reasons.

“It was Troy. You don’t *have* to tell me.”

“Do I *have* to tell you not to worry about it?” Will responded briefly almost under his breath, half expecting the look he received from Blue as he spoke, a dazed look full of disagreement. He kept his eyes fixed on Blue still, as though he was standing face to face with an angry bull and he had to keep his ground. Only this angry bull wasn’t all that angry, and in some way, Will knew how to keep him calm. At least, he thought he would. He could practically hear Blue’s protest before it came pouring out of his mouth in rapid succession.

The boy laughed out loud.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Blue exhaled through a disbelieving chuckle, his cheeks lifting and giving away the amused smile on his face even if it was hidden behind his coat. This expression quickly dropped as he noticed Will’s un-phased stare. He looked, for a moment, as though he’d just been slapped across the face.

“*Right?* I mean you’ve seen your *face*, right?” Blue continued, his tone a bit more pressing as his pace began to slow. Will winced only slightly at the idea that he was stopping to talk, and, though he hated to do so, Will slowed a bit to keep a steady walk next to him.

“I’ve seen my face plenty in the past few hours, thanks,” Will replied quietly, almost embarrassed. Blue didn’t seem to notice, unable to rip his eyes off of Will just in case the boy decided to crack a smile, to reveal he had been joking. He truly wasn’t. Absentmindedly, Will reached up and touched his cheek where he remembered the dark bruise underneath his eye to be, dropping his hand back to his side as if he was disappointed.

“Well, you can’t expect me not to say something,” Blue urged, turning his pace, as sluggish as it had been, to a stop. Will dwindled a moment, as though if he kept walking he might be able to convince Blue to walk with him, but as he noticed no movement from the taller boy, he, too, stopped and turned back to face his friend.

“I’m not expecting; I’m asking,” Will exhaled in a subtly tired tone, watching the disbelief on Blue’s face gradually dissipate, his lips thinning as he pursed them. He was clearly unimpressed and he wasn’t afraid to show it. He seemed to take note of the fact that Will wasn’t backing down however, and he was the first to break the unspoken staring contest they seemed to be having. Blue’s gaze

dropped to the ground like a scolded child, kicking a patch of snow in front of him with the toe of his winter boot. He didn't say anything, prompting Will to expel the silence between them once more.

"Please?"

From the soft pleading sound of Will's voice, Blue's attention seemed to be caught once more as he looked back upwards to his friend. His face held an air of surprise and mixed disappointment, but, with a passive huff and a breezy plume of breath escaping his lips, Blue began walking once more, dropping his eyes to the ground again as he caught up to Will. Will felt almost triumphant, for no exact reason that seemed logical: he had talked down the 'bull' without having to break out any tears. To him, that seemed like a success.

"You know, I really shouldn't be listening to a kid who runs around in the woods shouting out colours," Blue mused under his breath, catching a sharp look from Will that was far from aggressive. Blue had a subdued smile on his lips, small and contained as though he was trying to hide it. Seemingly contagious, a slow flush rose to Will's cheeks as he couldn't contain his own tiny grin, giving Blue's arm a soft punch as he shook his head.

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't have to be so creative if you would just *tell* me," Will retorted, aiming for the statement to be lighthearted but finding that it fell a little bit too true, hanging in the air between the boys and causing them both to fall into a thick silence for much too long.

Will could practically feel Blue turning away, like a turtle sliding back into its shell. He hadn't meant for his statement to come out so

harsh, but in a way, what other way could he have said it all while keeping truth interlaced between his words? For a few moments, the only sound between the two was several chilled snuffles before Blue spoke up, cutting the silence like a blade through thin air.

“You’ll figure it out,” Blue responded in a quiet voice, his eyes averted down to the ground as he seemed to be struggling with something in his hands. Reaching up momentarily and pulling his collar down, the only thing protecting his cheeks from the harsh cold, Will peered down at Blue’s hands.

He was peeling off his gloves, plumes of steam rising from his warmed fingertips.

“W—what are you doing? You’re gonna get cold!” Will scolded his friend as he stared down at his hands. The sky had begun to grow truly dark at this point, and Will practically had to squint to see Blue’s hands well enough in the dark. The dark haired boy turned his attention back to Will, never really making eye contact however.

Stuffing his glove into the open pocket of his jacket, Blue glanced downwards and, when Will had went to follow, he felt a sudden warmth inside the palm of his hand, unidentifiable for a moment before his hand heated up a bit, but it made him instinctively want to pull away. It was only when Will felt fingers flex against his own that he understood what Blue had done.

“I’ll be fine, I’ve had gloves this whole time,” Blue explained passively as he clutched Will’s hand tightly in his own, his skin almost hot in comparison to Will’s. No matter how tightly Blue seemed to clutch his hand in attempt to trap the heat between their palms as they carried on towards the path, Will still felt frozen, the

subtle glow of man made lights lighting up the home stretch a little ways up the path.

His entire body felt like he was made of stone, chilly and still the way a sculpture sits in a museum, for no other reason than to be ogled. As he slowly intertwined his own fingers with Blue's, accepting the embrace as they walked, Will could practically feel the violent shade of red that was probably tinting his cheeks.

Blue was just being a good friend, Will thought. And yet still, something about the embrace felt holy to him, felt comforting like a warm bed or a bowl of hot soup on a late winter morning. Something about the simple way Blue hadn't hesitated when he'd grabbed onto him, the way he hadn't been worried if someone was looking stuck to Will. He hated that some part of him seemed to be so different from Blue in this way, how he felt (but didn't act on) the need to whip his head around and make sure that nobody could see them. Why? He couldn't say, he just felt it. It was an ancient feeling, one that, even if Will couldn't prove it, felt like it had been ingrained in his brain a long time ago. Nobody, more specifically boys, held hands with other boys.

Well, except Will Byers. Clearly.

Through the anxiety, through the worry of being caught doing something so innocent like it was a crime, Will did feel safe there with Blue, even as they approached the neighbourhood where deep down he knew their hands would never meet again. In the woods, it felt like nobody could hurt them. Not Troy, not any of the other bullies that littered Hawkins Middle; nobody.

They were untouchable, between the trees, and in those brief

moments of comfort, Will was happy.

-

“Do you want another blanket? Anything?”

Seated on the floor of Blue’s carpeted basement, Will Byers was practically drifting in a sea of comforters and hand made quilts that he was sure Blue’s grandmother had intended to be used, but smelled most definitely like the bottom of a Tupperware container that hadn’t been opened in years. He was practically cocooned, layers of soft pinks and oranges wrapped around his shoulders as he leaned back against the couch. The external chill that harassed his skin had long since subsided, but a deep rooted cold still remained, feeling as though it had practically settled into Will’s bones as the boy shivered.

Will was intent on savouring every bit of heat that he could get from the blankets before he had to leave the sanctuary that was Blue’s basement and head back out into the cold. He had given Joyce a phone call when they had gotten home, doing his best to avoid the concerned questions she was asking about his ‘odd day at school’ and promising that he would explain it all when he saw her in an hour from then. Oh he could already imagine the shriek she might let out when she saw his face, and Will was most definitely not looking forward to having to explain himself. But for the time being, he was comfortable there, looking up towards where Blue’s voice had rung from.

From the top of the stairs, Blue clutched the raw wooden railing as he peered down at Will. He’d abandoned his coat upstairs when they had arrived 20 minutes before, adorned in a plain, dark blue sweatshirt and dark brown khaki pants. The sight of the boy without

any sort of coat, even inside his home, made Will feel even colder.

"I'm fine. Well..." Will said as an amused laugh escaped his throat, turning his gaze away from the boy and back down into the pile of blankets he was nestled inside. His thin, pale fingers clutched at the different fabrics that surrounded him, and he leaned back a bit more into the couch as he relaxed.

"Can you... can you just bring me some paper? And a pencil or pen or something, please?" Will asked meekly as he twisted around to look back up at Blue once more. Gripping a piece of one of his comforters in his hand, Will raised it as though he was holding a trophy up to show the boy. "We've got enough to make a huge blanket fort, *plus*. I think I'm gonna be alright," Will said as a thin smile slid its way onto his lips.

He dropped the blanket back into his lap, taking note of the way Blue's eyes seemed to catch as Will has responded. He could practically see a cartoon-ey glimmer in the boy's eyes before he simply nodded, darting back up the remaining stairs like a bat out of hell. Will cocked his head sideways, only for a moment as he turned back towards the TV stand that sat in front of him. Behind the thin glass doors that popped open if you gave them a slight press were a couple rows of VHS tapes, nothing too extreme collection-wise but enough to have a nice movie night if you really wanted. Will sat there with a slight lean for a few minutes, admiring the colours that were printed on the cases.

It had only seemed like a few seconds before Will heard youthful footsteps puttering down the hallway above him, and, just as quickly as he'd recognized that Blue was coming back, he was already halfway down the stairs. Will reached out and touched the glass barrier between him and the tapes quietly before Blue padded across

the carpet floor towards Will and flopped down next to him. As Will turned to look at Blue, the boy released his arms which had been cradled in front of him, a plethora of string Christmas lights, pens and markers and a roll of thin twine spilling out into Will's lap.

"What's all this?" Will asked curiously, intrigued by the random compilation of items that Blue had presented to him. As Will lifted his head to look his friend in the face, he was taken aback by the sheer giddiness that seemed to radiate from him. Wrapping a finger around the end of the lights and climbing to his feet once more, Blue trailed off towards the nearest power outlet, dragging the lights gradually out of Will's lap like some kind of electrical snake. As he plugged them into the socket, they lit up beautifully across the floor, like dim and slightly flickering stars across the dark carpet. Turning back towards Will, Blue clapped his hands together as though he'd just made a great accomplishment.

"Well?" Will urged through a startled laugh, watching Blue in tender awe.

"*Well,*" Blue repeated as he attempted to coo a large grin, staring back into Will's eyes with determination.

"We're going to make *a fort.*"

-

In less than ten minutes, the dimly lit basement that had only been illuminated by the corner lamp that sat above their couch had been transformed into some type of sanctuary. The dull yellow glow of the

lamp had been exchanged for that of string Christmas lights, framing the opening of the blanket fort that had been draped up and around the television and circled right back across the top of the couch. The excess from the strand laid strewn across the carpet floor towards the plug in like it had been abandoned. If one were to take a closer look inside the opening of the blanket fort, through the darkness that the string lights couldn't touch, they would be able to see two pairs of socked feet pressed up against the bottom of the television stand.

They had plenty of blankets, more than the two of them had expected, and even after the forts creation, Will Byers was still double wrapped in two toasty comforters, leaning against the chesterfield as he fumbled around for his markers. His hand blindly patted the area around him until his fingers brushed the cylindrical plastic shape of his writing utensils, and he snatched them up. It was only then, after a couple minutes of getting themselves settled, that Will realized through Blue's careful preparation, he had forgotten something.

"Hey, Blue?"

Turning away from the opening of the blanket fort and looking inwards at the boy, Will paused briefly as he observed Blue. He was leaning into the couch a bit, arm propped up on the exposed cushion, head nestled into the crook of his elbow with his face turned towards Will, a sleepy gaze resting in his eyes. Tucked inwards like this, Blue almost seemed smaller than he really was, even delicate in his slightly too large sweatshirt that seemed to be enveloping him in a sea of fabric. Lifting his head lazily, Blue's eyebrows raised in silent response.

Clutching the pens in his grasp, Will did his best to ignore the heavy thudding inside of his chest as he offered his hand out.

“I—I’m sorry, I just need some paper or something to draw on,” Will mumbled softly as though he was a bit embarrassed. He didn’t want to make Blue get up, especially when he seemed to be so content on the inside of the fort, but his hands were itching to have something to do.

Blue leaned forward a bit, a couple of wavy strands of hair drifting in front of his face as he did so. His eyes almost seemed to flutter shut briefly, but he righted himself as if they hadn’t, looking upwards at Will and giving him a nod in understanding. Without hesitation, Blue dropped his gaze once more and slid his fingers into the wrist of his sweater, pulling his sleeve all the way up to his elbow and turning to the other side to do the same.

Scooting up next to Will until they were hip to hip, not without giving the smaller boy’s stomach a good, metaphorical twist, Blue reached out and rested his exposed forearm on Will’s kneecap, shooting him a curious look.

“How’s this?” Blue said as a slow smile crept up onto his lips. Will stared down at the pale arm that was laid in offering before him for several seconds before his gaze flickered upwards at Blue, entertained by the stupidity and simultaneous creativity of the idea.

“Yeah, anything is fine,” Will muttered with an airy laugh as he uncapped one of his markers, shifting a bit back so that the lights could illuminate Blue’s arm better. Doing his best to move without hesitation, Will leaned in a bit more towards Blue and began tracing a thin line over his exposed skin. “Besides. You’re as pale as a sheet of paper anyways,” Will chided with a warm laugh, averting his eyes as Blue let out a low scoff.

“Yeah, yeah. Draw something cool,” Blue responded with a slight shake of his head, watching as Will got to work on drawing what appeared to be a few tiny planets dotting the clean skin of his wrist. Will kept his eyes trained on his work for the most part, though he found himself stealing a couple glances up at Blue when he thought the boy wasn’t looking.

“This is a lot of power you put in my hands. I could draw something stupid if I want,” Will said in an almost sing-song like whisper as a mischievous smile crept onto his lips. His eyes darted upwards and to his surprise, Blue was staring right back at him, a look of curiosity, or intrigue maybe, playing on his face.

“I guess,” Blue whispered back with a small grin, turning his gaze back down to his arm with Will in quick succession.

“If I tell you a good story, will you promise not to draw something weird on me?” Blue suggested in a calm tone as his head moved just slightly in the corner of Will’s eyes.

Will knew that Blue was looking at his face, waiting for a response, and Will could practically feel his heart slipping down into his stomach. He could very well pull his arm away and risk an abstract slash of dark blue if he really didn’t want to be drawn on. Will knew he was just playing games, and even if he wasn’t planning on drawing anything that wouldn’t look nice against Blue’s skin, Will slowly gave him a nod.

“Yeah. Of course.”

Will kept his gaze on Blue as the boy's face seemed to light up. He slid in a bit closer to the couch so that he could lay his head down once more, seemingly making sure that he didn't disturb Will's artistic efforts in the process. Resting his right cheek in the crook of his elbow once more and peering up at Will, Blue inhaled deeply and held for only a second before exhaling just as fully.

"So there was this kid," Blue began slowly, as though he was figuring his words out as he went. "We'll... we'll call him Mark. Now Mark was just a *little* kid. He was getting ready for his first day at kindergarten, and he just couldn't get over how anxious he was," Blue carried on, his words picking up speed as he settled into the concept a little bit more.

Will continued to trace solid lines across the tender flesh of Blue's exposed inner forearm, stealing glances over at the boy every now and then.

"His mom dropped him off at school on his first day, and she said 'Mark'..." Blue's voice hitched as he went up a slight octave, causing Will's brows to raise as he glanced over towards his friend. Blue had a stupid smile on his face as though he was trying not to laugh.

"Gimme a break, I'm not Mel Blanc," Blue muttered under his breath, and as he did so, Will could have sworn he saw a subtle darkening in the boy's cheeks. Will could practically feel his own face mimicking the blush that rose in Blue's face, and when he turned to look up at him, Will shot his gaze back down towards Blue's arm.

"No, continue. It's fine," Will assured him with a faint smile,

practically hyper focusing on the tiny scene he had begun on Blue's forearm. After a brief moment of silence, the story continued.

"Anyways, she says 'Mark... I know you're nervous, honey, but you're going to have so much fun. Maybe you'll even make a friend'. But Mark didn't have *any* friends. Which is probably why he was so scared. He probably felt pretty alone," Blue said as a brief sigh escaped his lips, tucking his head a bit more into the crease in his elbow as he watched Will draw. Will's pace had slowed just slightly as he began focusing a bit more on Blue's voice.

"Mark spends the whole first half of time there just being nervous and too scared to talk to anyone. He didn't really know what to do, you see. Not only didn't he have any friends, he'd *never* had one," Blue murmured, and the fingertips that were resting against Will's knee flexed a bit as Blue began to absently run his finger across the fabric. His voice had become that of a true storyteller, knowing when to emphasize words and pauses effectively. Will had become entranced by this.

"When it was time to go outside and play, Mark wanted nothing more than to go swing by himself. But when he got to the swing set, he saw another little boy there who was, like Mark, all alone. The little boy didn't seem to be too upset about being alone, though," Blue spoke gently now, and when Will took a moment after returning to his drawings to peer over at Blue, his face lit up like a Christmas tree, seeing that Blue had let his eyes fall shut.

"So Mark went over to him, and he sat down on the swing next to the little boy. And with every bit of courage in his tiny body, he turned to the little boy who had been all by himself, and he asked."

Blue paused, a small smile spreading across his lips.

“He asked the boy if he wanted to be his friend.”

“And what did he say?” Will asked in an honestly curious voice, watching Blue’s face for only a second more before he forced himself to return to the drawing in front of him. Faint, jagged lines of grass and gravel dotted Blue’s arm, and as Will waited for Blue’s response, he began drawing the metal structure of a swing set to accompany the scenery. Did that count as weird? Well, maybe. Some part of Will knew that Blue didn’t really care at that point.

“Oh, he said yes,” Blue assured Will as though it was obvious, a slow smile crossing his lips. “He said yes.”

“Kids?”

Will nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of Blue’s mother calling down the stairs to them. He hadn’t even heard her open the basement door. “Yeah, mom?” Blue called lightly, his eyes flickering open as he raised his head like a kid caught napping in the middle of a lecture.

“Joyce is here for you, Will, honey. You almost ready?”

“Y-yeah... just a moment!” Will called up to Karen, exhaling forcefully as though he was just getting over the slight scare he’d been given. Blue had gone quiet, observing what he could see of the

drawing from the dark part of the fort. Will capped the marker quietly, peering across Blue's arm and into the boy's face. He could have stayed in that fort forever, letting Blue tell him stories, even mundane ones, while he drew and drew and took comfort in the glowing multi-coloured hue the lights gave off. But he knew nothing like that could last forever.

"That seems like a pretty average story. No space ships or aliens or anything that comes to take the boy away? No adventure?" Will practically whined as he made no effort to move from where he was. Blue stared at him for a moment, blinking a couple times before he laid his head back down against his arm. An almost melancholic smile crossed his face, his eyes landing upon the stray lights left at the entrance of their fort.

"No adventure. But the way I read it, meeting that boy was the best thing Mark had ever done," Blue whispered in response, and in some odd way, Will noticed the faint blur between fiction and non.

7. shades of blue

Blue and Will had known each other much, much longer than Will had expected. Or at least, he assumed this was true. Blue hadn't come right out that night and said that his story was something more than fictional, but he hadn't needed to. Will could tell in the way that Blue had spoken, his voice twisted in melancholy like he was speaking of an old friend he'd lost long ago. In reality, it hadn't been all that long ago that Blue had 'lost' his best friend. Only a couple mornings after the night Will and Blue had spent tucked inside of their blanket fort, Will Byers' third week home came to a close. It really hadn't felt all that long to him, particularly because he'd been off of school for the majority of it.

After he has gone back to school and slowly started to integrate himself back into his classes, the days quickly began to drag on a bit longer, but Will still found that he was drifting through his days and through the bustling crowds of students like a phantom. He didn't feel like he was truly there, his mind entirely occupied with anything but his schoolwork. Though part of him was becoming increasingly more tolerant of his lack of memory, his irritation seemed to stick to him like drying cement. Even if he was learning to be okay with it, that didn't mean that everyone else was.

It was that which was haunting him.

Will was in search of confirmation, and that early Saturday morning, he intended to get it. He had roused himself from bed not too long after ten that morning, a rather lengthy sleep that almost made him, in turn, want to climb right back into bed and remain there. He pressed himself a bit further, however, and with enough effort, Will swung his legs out of bed and dropped his feet gently to his bedroom floor, instinctively yanking his toes from the cool wood for only a single shocked second before letting them fall again. The mid

morning sunlight broke through a small gap in his bedroom curtains, and he passed through the rays of light briefly as he approached the small wooden desk that sat on the farthest side of his room from the doorway. The workspace was a bit of a mess, swarmed with papers full of half-drawn figures and crayons that hadn't yet been placed back into their box. Will was still half asleep, yet: not quite ready to be creative, but it wasn't art supplies he was looking for.

Stepping up to the table's edge, Will let out a soft yawn as he tucked a few light brown hair behind his ear. With his free hand, he reached across the mess and wrapped his fingers around a weighted black box, twisting it around in his hand so that he could see the dark grey and red buttons programmed into it's face: his walkie talkie. Lucas had mentioned the Supercom in passing one day that week, when they had all sat crowded around a pale grey lunch table, gnawing peacefully at their food. Lucas seemed to be the closest to Will's home, aside from Dustin, leaving Blue to be the farthest from him.

Lucas had said, with a warm glint in his eyes, that Will could give him a buzz any time he wanted to talk, stating that the two of them may as well take advantage of the brief distance between them. This statement, though said briefly and discarded just as quick as the blink of an eye, sat with Will, and he felt like, if he could ask what he needed to ask to anyone, the most likely to answer him would be Lucas.

To Will's excitement and possible disdain, Lucas' voice broke through the other side of the Supercom mere moments after Will had muttered a half hearted 'you there?' into the open channel. Will imagined Lucas must have been sitting right next to it when he had buzzed in, or otherwise he was just really excited to hear the boy's voice. Either way, the sudden realization that he was going through with what needed to be done sent Will into a deadly silence, seated on the edge of his bed with his walkie clutched tightly in his hand like a statue. Will remained like this for several seconds before Lucas'

voice erupted from the small speaker piece once more.

“Will? You there? Over.”

Pushing his shoulders back a bit as though taking a stretch might help him, Will pressed his thumb down on the ‘talk’ button and raised the mic a couple inches from his lips.

“Yeah, uh, hey. Sorry. I just... had to grab something,” Will murmured in a painless white lie, his eyes flickering upwards to the single pane window that sat across from his bed. From the spot where Will was sat, he could just barely see the frame of their backyard shed poking out of the corner of the pane. He found himself slipping away from the present moment once more, eyes darting upwards along the aged wooden planks that lined the side of the shed. He wasn’t exactly sure how he should go about asking Lucas what he needed to, nor was he even sure that the boy would answer him. As he studied the framework, the soft crackle of his Supercom lit up once more as Lucas was likely chiming in to accuse Will of daydreaming, and the boy was snapped back to reality.

“Lucas—” Will cut in, not waiting to see what his friend might have had to say on the other end of the line before he continued his sentence, pressing his lips together as he formed his words internally.

“Lucas, how long have Blue and I been friends?” Will finished, opening his mouth just slightly in impatient waiting as though the single sentence had snatched the breath right out of his lungs. There was a thick moment of silence lingering over the connection between the two of them, and Will didn’t need to be told that Lucas was probably deciding whether he should tell Will or not. After a moment of quiet, the walkie let out a soft buzz.

“I don’t know if I’m allowed to tell you,” Lucas spoke slowly through the faint buzz shrouding their connection that the distance caused. Will waited for a moment, expecting Lucas to continue his sentence but he didn’t seem to be clicking back into the conversation. Will felt his chest tighten, the subtle irritation that Blue’s refusal to give any information caused him reflecting back into Lucas. Will didn’t want to be mad, and truly he wasn’t; he only felt stuck, like he was trying to wade through quicksand and his friends helping hands were just slightly out of reach. Will’s fingers tightened around the casing of his walkie, and as he stood to place it back onto the desk, thumb poised to turn off the switch and cut the conversation short with his bitter mood, but Lucas’ voice passed through the speaker once more.

“I mean, it’s not that big of a deal. Just promise you won’t tell him I told you if he asks you? Over,” Lucas spoke warily on the other end, and Will could almost hear the creak of a bed from the boy’s side as he shifted. Will, walkie outstretched in front of the desk, stepped away and brought it back up to his chin, turning towards his bedroom door and looking out of the open frame. Jonathan’s bedroom door was shut, seated directly across the hallway from his own room, but Will could hear his older brother shuffling lazily around down the hallway, likely looking for some form of food to eat. Ripping his eyes away from the door, Will looked down at the wooden floor beneath his feet as he buzzed in.

“Yeah, I promise, okay?”

Silence.

“How long have we been friends, Lucas? Over.”

Silence.

Will began to open his mouth once more, but he was cut off.

“Since kindergarten, he’s said. Longer than the party as a whole. Dustin didn’t even come along until the fourth grade, and you still have a few years on me, over,” Lucas spilled into the mic on his end as Will listened intently, his fingers subconsciously gripping the Supercom a little bit tighter until his fingertips were practically white. He could feel his heart drumming inside of his chest, echoing inside of his ears even if he wasn’t exactly sure why.

The skin on the tops of his hands and the sides of his neck felt hot, like he’d just been caught in an embarrassing predicament and his skin was lighting up with a fiery blush. He knew the story had been true, in some way, already. Yet somehow, it was the confirmation that really seemed to set him off. Will’s lips opened and closed briefly for a moment as he considered in what way would be the right way to respond. If there was a right way.

He pressed the talk button in, raising the mic up to his mouth.

“O-okay, thanks, Lucas. That’s... that’s all I was wondering,” Will sputtered as calmly as he could manage into the mic without breaking out into a consistent, nervous stutter, forgetting to close off his sentence as he sat in silence for a moment.

“He never really stops talking about it. It’s kind of annoying, if you ask me, but hey. It’s just the way he is,” Lucas’ voice mused through the walkie. Will’s eyes darted down into the mic, as though he felt

like he was being stared down by mere words. The uncomfortable heat that resided on the back of his neck seemed to travel up to his cheeks, and Will could practically feel his stomach dropping down into the pit of his gut, wound up into metaphorical knots. *He never stops talking about it. He never stops talking about it. About meeting you,* Will thought. It wasn't really a big deal. If anything, it was appreciation, Will imagined.

So why, when Will looked down into his palms, could he feel his heart rate picking up?

"You okay, Will?"

"I'm okay," Will spoke easily now, having taken a moment to breathe before Lucas had chimed back in. "I'll, uh... I'll talk to you in a bit. I have to help Jonathan. Over and out." Will brushed through each sentence rapidly as he felt a growing urge for closure, flicking the off switch on to let himself sit and think even if it was briefly. He didn't know why his heart felt like it was ramming into his chest at the speed of a jackhammer. He almost felt panicked, like he'd done something wrong and he couldn't take it back. It took him several moments, ignorant of the sound of footsteps slowly padding down the hallway closer to his room, for Will to understand that it wasn't fear powering his rapid heartbeat. It was excitement.

"Did your fall give you crazy mind powers, buddy?"

Will nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of Jonathan's voice emanating from his previously half open bedroom doorway. Twisting around to face the direction in which he'd heard his brother, Will shifted uncomfortably as he noticed how dry his throat seemed to be. Jonathan stood with his right shoulder leaned hard into the wooden

frame of the entrance, still not dressed for the day as he was adorned in a pale grey t-shirt and sweatpants that seemed to be maybe a size too large for him. His hair was a mess of golden strands, all pushed back away from his face but still, in some way, blocking a good portion of his vision.

“W-what?”

Jonathan seemed to make no effort to suppress a smile as he watched Will, taking note of how the boy’s soul almost seemed to slip back into his body after he realized it was only his brother standing there.

“I was just coming to get you up. I need a little help. You read my mind,” Jonathan began to explain, his fingers flexing against his closed fist as he played with a small object he seemed to be holding in his hands.

Will stood from his spot on the bed, rounding the end board and making his way across the room to his brother. It seemed, for the time being, like his body was beginning to relax again, however it was still blindingly unusual to Will that his body had been anything but relaxed in the first place. The mere thought of his reaction almost flared it up once more, and with that, Will placed his last conversation with Lucas into the back parts of his brain, keeping it aside for when he had time to really think it over. Jonathan, watching Will as he approached, extended a closed fist and unfolded his fingers, revealing a small reflective glass piece, hues of vibrant reds staining every single face it had. Will recognized the shape almost immediately.

“Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown. We’ve got a tree to put up,” Jonathan mused with a gentle nudge to Will’s shoulder, escaping

with a warm smile as he clutched the small spare Christmas light in his palm once more and disappeared out into the hallway, leaving Will to follow behind him. He took no time to do so, and as Will parted from his bedroom, from the faintly remembered sounds of his Supercom that seemed to be continuously echoing in his head, Will felt like he was stepping outside to get a brief breath of fresh air. No matter how far back he seemed to push their conversation, or Lucas' truth, even as Will padded down the hallway and into the living room slowly, his hands never really stopped shaking.

-

Will learned rather quickly that he and Jonathan didn't need to be out right vocal to communicate things to each other, and if they did, they most definitely did not need to be direct about it. Will figured this out rather quickly that morning, as he had trailed out of his bedroom after Jonathan as the two of them slipped into the living room and Will was introduced to the freshly cut pine tree that was leaning into the corner of the room.

Will hadn't needed to ask for more information when Jonathan had told him that he'd gone out to cut the tree down that morning, his t-shirt still slightly sprinkled with pine needles.

He didn't need to be told that his mother simply didn't have the time to go get one, and he didn't need to be told that they might not have been able to afford to purchase one anyways. Whether they had a costly tree or not, however, was redundant, as Will stared upwards into the trunk of their soon-to-be Christmas tree. Paid trees didn't make you happier, and the idea that maybe, just maybe they could put a genuine smile on their mother's face filled Will with a fiery determination.

The two of them got to work rather quickly, hauling a small tub of Christmas lights out of the shed that sat lazily in the backyard and back into the house with both of their grips aiding each other. They began to work almost in an assembly line style: Will would sit on the floor, untangling the lights as he went, while Jonathan would loop the lights up around the tree, the only of the two that was tall enough to do so. Will could imagine, some time before or shortly after he'd been born, that Joyce and Jonathan likely would do this exact same thing; Jonathan perched on the floor with the lights in his clutches, while their mother would wrap them around the tree like she'd done for years. The thought brought him peace, and he relished in it for a moment.

Their conversations dwindled on and off, and this gave Will plenty of time to think to himself when chunks of silence weaved their way in between their sentences. It took him only a short while to notice that, as his thin fingers worked at untangling the dark green chords in his lap, these fingers were shaking once more.

“Jonathan?”

“Hm?” Jonathan responded in passing, never tearing his gaze from his work. The shaking wasn't violent, just subtle enough for Will to know that they were, indeed, shaking because he was thinking. Thinking, he discovered, was a violent thing for him, and as he sat there, cross legged on the wooden floor beneath him, he turned his gaze up to his brother. Jonathan had his eyes trained on the tree in front of him, watching as he carefully mapped out where the lights needed to cross cross to look just right. He looked almost too focused to be interrupted, but Will found that the words were slipping past his lips before he could control himself.

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

Jonathan, having been efficiently wrapping the tree for the past few minutes, visibly slowed, his hands lingering with the extra chord wrapped around his fingers. He seemed to consider Will's words, whether he was considering Will's reason for the question itself or whether he was trying to decide on his answer, Will couldn't tell. After a brief moment of silence, Jonathan continued to string up the multi-coloured lights.

“No, I don't. Do you?” Jonathan offered in return, shooting an entertained look down towards his little brother before returning his attention to the tree.

Will's eyes widened, watching Jonathan work as he felt his face grow slightly warm. Will Byers, the blank slate, a practical zombie without memory. Will Byers, a girlfriend? Of all things? Some part of him knew that Jonathan was just messing with him, but his fingers tensed as he continued to untangle the wires in his lap.

“N-no.... why... would I?” Will murmured, the volume of his voice dwindling with each syllable as his eyes darted back down to his handiwork. The truth was, Will didn't exactly know why he felt the need to ask. He could tell he was being a bit obvious, about what he wasn't quite sure, but as he stared into the pile of brightly coloured lights, he could feel a gaze burrowing into the top of his head.

“Just curious, bud. Anyone you've got your eye on?” Jonathan suggested lightly, his tone muffled enough that Will could tell he wasn't looking directly down at him anymore. He seemed to be almost avoiding the topic that had begun with him, but Will knew he ought not to question why. If Jonathan was having girl problems,

that was none of Will's business unless his brother wanted it to be. Some part of Will knew, however, that he wasn't really asking for Jonathan's sake. Some part of him wanted to know for himself, to know if he needed it, he would have someone there to talk to about that sort of thing.

That sort of thing. *What* sort of thing exactly was it?

"So what do they look like?" Jonathan piped up once more, drawing Will out of the shell he'd turned into as he thought about his own goals. Will swallowed hard, not having the courage to tell Jonathan that he hadn't really been thinking anything particular. He didn't think he had been. Turning a bit inwards, Will handed the next solid amount of untangled light strand up to his brother.

"Brown hair... brown eyes..." Will began, not really settling on the image of anyone but rather what he thought he might like. He didn't want to lead on to Jonathan that he was lying, exactly, so he continued on as though he was writing his own little bit about what his dream partner might look like, twisting a piece of chord around his fingers.

"They've got... freckles. They have these little—" Will raised his hand shyly, touching the outer corners of his eyes as he stared down into his lap.

"--These little lines, when they laugh or when they smile that come out up here. They're funny. They're nice..." Will carried on, droning on with what he thought was blind description of what he imagined love might look like. *Love*. He didn't really have anything to go on; after the accident, it had even taken Will a little while to understand that he loved his mother, but not in the same way he might love

someone who wasn't his family. Love was a foreign word, less of a description and more of a physical manifestation. If love was a colour, Will thought, it might be a bright pink, or a sunny yellow. He didn't know how to word it otherwise.

Yet trying to explain it then, for some reason, made him feel like he was becoming choked up. The tops of his hands flushed along with his shoulders and his cheeks, and he turned his head down even more, practically looking like he'd fallen asleep sitting up at this point. From above him, Jonathan let out a soft laugh, likely at the state of his brother sitting below him.

"They sound nice. And you like them?" Jonathan asked curiously, his tone more docile than as questioning as it had been before.

Will couldn't answer.

"How am I supposed to know?" Will asked slowly, the first honestly understood question he'd asked since the beginning of their brief little conversation. This was the problem: he couldn't pin point how someone might know if they felt a certain way, such as that, towards another person. Logically, he understood: you feel happier around them, you feel at peace and at home and safe with them. That's what he imagined it was like. How, though, do you come to figure out something like that? Does it come entirely as an epiphany, or does it seep into you slowly, with a subtle realization? He didn't know.

"You just... know," Jonathan responded, his voice almost dropping into a whisper as he grew closer to the bottom of the tree, taking a moment to move around to the other side of the tree, passing behind Will in dull silence. "It sort of just comes to you, I think. You might be with them, just doing something or nothing important, and it

might be the way they smile at you or laugh at something they said or even the way that they scold you for something you did. It could be anything.” Jonathan spoke peacefully, his eyes wandering up the tree right up to the top. Will had turned his face upwards to look at him as he spoke, watching as his face seemed to light up as he spoke, like he was speaking from some sort of experience.

“It could be anything, but you’ll look at them, and you just *know*. You know that they’re important to you and that you would do anything for them. You’d just want to be with them all the time,” Jonathan muttered, pausing briefly as he realized he’d been spilling on for a minute before glancing down at Will. A slow smile curled on his lips.

“You just *know*, I guess,” he spoke, and something about it was final.

“Whoever they are, I hope they know how lucky they are to have a cool dude like you pining over them,” Jonathan teased his brother weakly, an attempt to pull himself away from the serious tone his voice had taken. This caught Will though, for some reason or another. He hadn’t really realized it when they had been talking, but it struck him just then like the statement had been out of character.

As Jonathan rounded the back of the tree and fumbled with the plug in the wall, Will realized that not once did either of them say *she*.

Will thought then, in some sudden understanding, that love wasn't pink or yellow, or anything soft like that. It was a baby blue.

Another thought came to him, a thought stemming from this but almost entirely independent from it. As Will stared up into the tree,

his eyes adjusting as the lights flickered on and illuminated its branches, tendrils of light streaking through the pine needles, he realized something else.

The entire time, whether he had been consciously thinking about it or not, Will had been describing Blue.

8. good at finding

Summary for the Chapter:

Edit: Wow. Okay, holy shit. So first of all, THANK YOU. There has been a bunch of buzz on twitter about WIMM over the past several days and I am ripe with excitement that people are enjoying my writing. I wouldn't have started writing again without my friends support, and so this chapter is dedicated to Kadence, Maddie, Rebecca, and Hunter, as well as Ellen and Erin for being SO supportive of WIMM. From the bottom of my heart, THANK YOU <3

I hope you folks enjoyed a little chapter of our will/lucas friendship and some sweet jonathan/will content. I suppose that means I should warn you in advance. Warning for scenes of violence.

“You were never this smart, Byers.”

Had anybody else made such a statement towards him, anybody but Lucas, Will might have taken it as an insult. For some reason, however, as the three boys dragged themselves out of their seats and began stuffing the remnants of that day's work and future homework into their knapsacks, Will, at least somewhat, understood what Lucas was trying to say to him. In some way, and he had been able to tell by the dazed look on his professor's face when he'd turned in that session's in-class assignment, Will understood that before everything had happened, he hadn't been all that great when it came to math.

Maybe he hadn't been all that great at school at all, but he was smart and deep down he knew that, too. Will had expected, fully, that going back to school with fuzzy memories rattling around in your brain might be a little bit more than jarring. He hadn't expected that

he would be able to focus at all, whether he could remember the remnants of the beginning of the school year and its teachings or not.

“Hey! I’m not stupid!” Will had cut in quickly, a startled and over exaggerated smile of disbelief flashing across his face as he leaned into Lucas, giving the boy’s shoulder a gentle punch. He had been fully prepared to start entirely fresh when it came to school, and though he had needed to do just that like he’d thought, Will found, strangely, that having an entirely fresh canvas of a brain wasn’t all that bad when it came to school.

It was like everything clicked more easily now that there was enough space for the puzzle pieces of his classes to fit together, and when he had passed in his assignment that late afternoon, his professor had been surprised to find that Will had almost gotten every single question correct. His only error had been a miscalculation, and even then, he had done the formula entirely spot on besides that minor step.

He had stuffed the papers into his bag without more than a second thought about it, however, besides a mild pride lingering in his stomach. Will’s thoughts were still preoccupied, but he was doing his best to keep his mind drilled into something other than the conversation he and his brother had shared. He was failing miserably at that.

It's the thought that counts, Will thought in spite.

How do you even approach something like that, he’d asked himself many times through the span of time between when they’d spoken and the few days afterwards, those of which had been plagued with that thought and variations of it. *How do you even consider liking*

somebody? You just know, Jonathan had told him. As if that made any sense at all. As if that didn't just sound like a teasing joke to the younger Byers boy.

You just know.

Yeah, maybe, he had thought as he packed himself up and teetered off towards the classroom door, trailing just a few steps behind Lucas and Dustin as they discussed dates for their next D&D campaign. *Maybe you do just know*, Will had thought to himself. *But how do you even approach doing something about it once you know?*

Will Byers knew. Deep down, he knew. God, he would block it out for as long as he could. That was what he was supposed to do, right?

Right?

"So we're all good for this weekend, right guys?" Dustin chimed in as the three of them slid out of the classroom door like three bulls in a china shop, impatiently maneuvering so that the three of them could get out practically all at once. "I'm just asking because I don't want to give you any space to flake out," Dustin quipped slyly in Lucas' direction, causing the boy to shoot an unimpressed look back at Dustin.

"As if *you* haven't flaked out on us before!" Lucas snapped back, his tone sharp like a razor but harmless, still. Dustin had taken no time to comment something in response but Will found that he drifted back a bit, verbally, hanging halfway out of the conversation as he continued to spin a tight web of thoughts inside of his brain. He was no longer focused on the two boys standing in front of him, playfully bickering about their ditching habits while Will turned inwards. He didn't want to admit to himself that he had been thinking about, well, *that*. He could barely think about it directly, always skirting

around the idea like blocking out the words in his brain might make him forget about it altogether.

As if he hadn't done enough of that, he felt he needed to forget it too.

It, of course, being the fact that Will Byers liked boys. He physically shook his head, as though that might shake the words out of his brain. It was weird to him, particularly unsettling because if Lucas or Dustin, if Jonathan or anyone else, even boys he didn't know, liked boys, Will couldn't really see himself having a problem with that. It was a problem, though, in *him*. Will could see the way that people looked at boys who smiled and laughed a little too whole-heartedly with each other, the way other students liked to call stupid or pathetic things names that didn't belong in such a sentence. He didn't know why, but he felt like it was an issue. As if he wasn't already stared at during school hours. As though he wasn't already beat on enough. He could keep it a secret though, couldn't he? His throat practically felt like it was closing over, and inside of his pockets, Will's fingertips pressed into his clammy palms.

I like boys, he thought. *I like boys. I like a boy and I don't know why but I know it's not right and I know I can't say anything, but it feels like I'm going to collapse and I don't know why Jesus, it's not just me, it can't just be me, it can't just be me, I can't be the only one in love with my best fr—*

Will almost stopped in his tracks in the dead centre of the bustling hallway. The word had passed over his thoughts before he could even process it. Choking up even when he wasn't speaking, Will could feel his face lighting up with a faint crimson.

Love. He'd said love. He'd *thought* it, rather, but it was loud enough as it echoed through his brain that he thought he might have accidentally spoken out loud.

No, he couldn't be in love. Love didn't work that way, right? *Will Byers was not in love. What was the age limit anyways? There must be one. It was a crush, a tiny little thing that would go away the moment he met the right girl.*

Just like love, this suggestion made his throat catch too. Only this time, it felt horrible.

Will Byers isn't in love, he thought. *Will Byers isn't gay. W—*

“Will?”

While he had been a little too preoccupied with his thoughts, Will hadn't realized that he'd been completely ignoring Dustin's questioning.

Through Will's silence, Dustin had actually twisted around once they had gotten a ways into the hall to assess Will's response. Truth was, he wasn't exactly sure what he was responding to, but he gave a quiet nod anyways, watching as Dustin's face lit up and he suckered Lucas in the arm, causing the boy to yelp and clutch his arm in protest.

“I told you! Bard is an equally important role, and you know it!” Dustin chided as he turned forward once more, sliding his hands deep into the pockets of his khaki pants.

Lucas glanced back at Will, and though he'd expected a sharp look of disapproval headed his way, Lucas instead gave him a sympathetic smile, as though he understood his choice.

“Mr. Paladin will probably agree with me, too,” Dustin added finally, but before Lucas could twist back around and respond, Will nearly slammed into Dustin’s back as the boy stopped abruptly in front of him. Instinctively reaching out and grabbing onto Dustin’s shoulder, Will stepped out of the boy’s way.

“What?—“ he had begun to say, but as he peered in front of Dustin, Will found the need to ask had grown null.

In front of them was a thick wall of students, all crowded around some sort of sight that the three boys couldn’t exactly see. There were at least 20 or 30 kids all pressed tightly into a ring, blocking the hallway and turned away from the boys.

Lucas had opened his mouth to begin excusing himself through the sea of kids, but he was silenced by the sound of a tussle on the other side of the students. Several of the kids seemed to start cheering on the ruckus that was happening just outside of Will’s view, and he would have suggested that the three of them turn around and promptly go the other way if he hadn’t heard a familiar voice cry out from the other side of the wall.

“Say it again, freak! I dare you! Is that pipsqueak worth the trouble?”

Will’s blood ran cold. He recognized the voice immediately.

“Guys—“ Will began, his voice wavering, but this time, someone else cut him off.

“I—I said,” the voice began, stammering but not fearful, “— I said

fuck you, Troy!”

Will recognized this voice even better than Troy’s.

He’d heard that voice almost every single day for the past 3 weeks.

It was Blue.

As though he was the one in the confrontation, Will’s fight or flight kicked itself into overdrive. Stepping past Dustin before he could even dart into the crowd himself, Will rushed into the wall of students, shimmying between them and pushing whenever he needed to. He was practically suffocating from the buzz of quips and cheers coming from several of the students, as well as the tight space he was locked into.

He felt a hand slap onto his shoulder, and, whipping around, Will made brief eye contact with Lucas, who had trailed after Will without hesitation. He gave the boy a brief nod of approval, and with that Will twisted back around and continued his way through the sea of bystanders. He had nearly broken the internal surface of the crowd when, almost like a flash of lightening, Troy and his buddy came bursting through the other side at the exact same time, nearly knocking Will and Lucas over as they tore past them. Lucas had instinctively grabbed onto Will’s shoulders to keep him from toppling back into him, and when Will had shot a look back at the two boys, Troy had done the exact same, catching wind of Will’s cheeks, still faintly bruised and tender.

He merely smiled, a prideful smile as though he was reminiscent of

his own handiwork, before disappearing into the crowd of onlookers.

To Will's fear, as he pushed through the rest of the students in front of him, he was sure Troy was smiling at the idea of what he might have done to Blue.

Busting through the last of the kids, Will stopped so hard that Lucas nearly walked straight into him.

Blue was on his hands and knees, his head down as though he was trying to catch his breath. Will had opened his mouth to speak but found that nothing came out, and as Blue attempted to bring himself up to his feet, he wobbled weakly, shooting a hand out and grabbing at the floor once more. Lucas squeezed past Will, who seemed to be nothing more than a concrete statue in that moment, and grabbed a hold of Blue's arm, guiding the boy to his feet in steady patience. Blue accepted only as much help as he needed to, as once he regained enough balance to stand straight (or at least semi-straight) he tore his arm out of Lucas' grasp, keeping his gaze locked down onto the ground.

"Y-yeah.... Show's over," Blue hissed at the crowd around him, voice breaking only slightly as he appeared to flinch from the sound of it. A few students began to trickle back which in turn, after several seconds, kicked crowd mentality into gear as the rest of the students scurried away down the hall, shooting nervous or amused glances back at the boy. The knees of his dark pants were coated in a thin layer of dust from the floor, and his left palm was clutching at his nose, twisting away from the boys as he attempted to dodge them.

"Whoa, hey. Dude, just wait" Dustin began, stepping up next to Lucas and Will but receiving nothing more than an irate, dismissive wave. Blue turned his back to them, stepping away and beginning a walk down the hallway as though he had no need to acknowledge them. To Will, some part of watching Blue walk away felt like watching the

boy slip out of his life for the rest of time. Kicked out of his stupor by this irrational thought, Will's hand jolted out, grabbing onto Blue's sweater sleeve in a feeble attempt to slow him down.

"Wait," Will had begun, tightening his grip on the fabric. "Just let me h—"

"No! I don't need your help, Will! *Jesus!*" Blue yelled in frustration, whipping his arm away from Will violently as though he'd been zapped. Though he'd succeeded in getting Blue to slow to a stop, Will sensed that he was about to get an earful instead of the calm conversation he'd hoped they could have. Will could feel a subtle dampness against the tips of his fingers, and as he tore his gaze away from Blue and looked down into his open hand, a wave of anxiety washed over him as he spotted the crimson culprit staining his skin. Turning his stare back upwards at Blue, Will understood where the blood had come from. Blue's nose was bleeding heavily, trickling down his chin onto his orange and black striped jumper. He must have taken to wiping it away with his sleeve, as Will could spot a matching stain forming on the arm of his sweater where he had grabbed onto him.

"I'm sorry, I just—" Will began, physically shying away as he was cut off quickly again.

"Sorry? Sorry for *what?*" Blue urged in a thin tone, his eyes desperately searching Will's face for some sort of explanation, though the unimpressed look in his gaze might suggest he didn't care what Will might have to say anyways. Blue's voice was slow, firm, like he'd realized he was yelling and was trying desperately to refrain from doing so, while miserably failing. Will could feel himself turning in, but as he opened his mouth to object, Blue piped up once more.

“Do you even know what you’re apologizing for? Or are you just saying sorry because you think it’s what you’re supposed to do?” Blue demanded, his voice just as ripe with upset as it was with irritation. Will could sense that the anger wasn’t entirely directed to, or because of him, but there was something in Blue’s voice that suggested he wasn’t only angry about his injuries. He placed his sleeve frantically to his nose for a moment, tipping his head back, his eyes gazing up at the ceiling as if he might find an explanation there.

“Or are you apologizing because you think maybe it’ll make all this okay?” Blue asked, but this time, there was a corrosive aspect in his words that made Will tense up. That, Will knew almost immediately, had nothing to do with the situation they were currently in.

That was deeper.

“You know what? Say what you have to say, then!” Will blurted suddenly, catching Blue off guard as his eyes darted back down to the boy. Something, Will had sworn, flashed across them; something like a look of sheer upset, or confusion. It was gone the instant he’d seen it, however, and was immediately replaced by a fiery hurt.

“I’m not doing this right now,” Blue muttered under his breath, but as he had twisted around to walk away once more, Will grabbed a hold of him again.

“You *are*, actually!” Will snapped, his voice nearly breaking underneath the pressure he felt in his chest. “You *are* doing this right now, so *tell* me!” Will urged, loosening his grip as Blue had tensed underneath it. Several students passed by them but none really gave

them any more attention than a bewildered look. As little as it was, it gave Will passing relief.

Blue turned back to face him, a vicious hurt radiating from him.

“Really? Okay, then,” Blue began, whipping his arm out of Will’s grasp and stepping towards him.

“Tell me, are you even *trying* anymore?” he asked, his voice honest in questioning underneath pressing words.

Will froze in place, frustration that had been seeping into his words cut short as he felt like the air was sucked from his chest. From behind him, Will heard Lucas pipe up, but he couldn’t tear his eyes off of Blue’s face.

“Hey, come on, man...” Lucas cut in sharply, his voice almost pleading as if he knew where the conversation was headed.

“What?” Will exhaled with force, a half-assed scoff as he stared up at Blue. Any other words that might have felt right to come out fell flat in the back of his throat. It made him angry, it did, but anger had a way of changing inside of Will. It hurt more than he thought it would. It hurt a lot, in fact.

“I can’t even tell if you are, if you do.... If you do care at all at this point,” Blue continued, wiping his nose once more as blood partially stained his lips, staring into Will’s face like he was looking for

something, still. It was then that Will got a good solid look at Blue's face; not nearly as bad as his own had been, but enough that he would turn heads. Bad enough in slightly different ways. Tiny bruises dotted the end of his right eyebrow, and what appears to be a thin purple bruise was slowly forming underneath his eye. Will cringed at the sight of it, wanting to look away but knowing that neither of them deserved that.

"Maybe you're just letting me—letting Lucas, Dustin and I just throw stories and stuff at you like there's any chance that you'll remember," Blue mused, throwing a hand up and letting it flop lifelessly back to his side, eyeing Will like the boy should be reacting to any of this. He was reacting, of course: but it was more of a growing sting, a chokehold around his throat that increased in pressure with every single statement that Blue made. He opened his mouth to speak again, but only a small choked noise came out, as Blue cut in.

"Cause you know what? Honestly, you probably won't *ever* remember who I am, will you?" Blue said through an exasperated tone, like the anger was slowly draining from his voice as he appeared to be coming to this realization. Anger was shifting rapidly into something sadder, something bubbling and hissing deep inside of Blue, and Will stared into Blue's face, like he was trying to crack the code behind his words even if they weren't all that cryptic.

Maybe he just hoped that Blue didn't mean what he was saying. Will hadn't noticed that he had tears in his eyes until his vision had started to blur. He was almost too quick to look away, even if it was only briefly, biting down hard on his tongue as though that might keep his lips from trembling. The tension had begun to disappear from Blue's posture, and now the boy seemed like he was practically holding himself up with every last ounce of strength in his body. His eyes were shot down at the floor.

"So why can't you just stop trying? Why can't you just give up trying

to remember if you know... if it won't happen?" Blue muttered, more in a truly questioning way rather than a sharp jab. Regardless of the intention, regardless of the fact that he was almost talking outloud to himself now, every single one of Blue's words had struck Will in the stomach like a precision dart. The two boys behind him had gone dead silent, not even the shifting of their feet audible as Will's ears seemed to take on the sensation of a hollow tunnel for a moment. All of his senses seemed to dull. Blue shook his head, raising his gaze as he spoke.

"Why *can't* I just give up?" Blue demanded of himself, his voice dropping to a whisper and his posture tensing once more as he looked up at Will directly for the first time since he'd begun his tirade.

Will hadn't realized he was crying until he felt a cool tear drip down onto his t-shirt.

Did it hurt so much to consider that Blue was likely right about everything he was saying? Will hadn't stopped thinking about it, about his memories, since he'd gotten home that first day, wracking his brain for answers when nothing seemed to live there anymore. Will didn't need to consider Blue's words, because he had been terrified to admit they were likely true the entire time he'd been trying to heal. To remember.

So why couldn't he give up, if Blue so desperately wanted to? Clearing his throat, as though that might keep his voice from wavering, Will looked up at Blue and gave the boy a downtrodden smile. He couldn't find it in him to ache even more as he noticed the absolute sense of horror in Blue's face, like he'd just realized what he'd said. Truth be told, he wasn't sure he could ache any more in that moment. The words had already struck him. They were something he *couldn't* forget.

“You can,” Will said simply, his voice trembling ever still.

“Will—“ Dustin had began from behind him, but the boy had already twisted around and escaped between the two of his friends, yanking his arm away violently when one of them had reached out to try and stop him. He continued down the hall, picking up his pace as his vision grew blurrier by the moment. He couldn’t bring himself to slow down, even while his friends frantic calls drifted down the corridor after him.

By the time he was jogging down the nearly entirely empty hallway, tears were falling freely down Will’s face, uncontrolled gasps escaping his lips as he approached the side doors of the school and slammed his open palms into the push bar, shoving the door open and escaping into the frigid late November air.

He had no clue where he was going, but home seemed like the very best option. In retrospect, he imagined that he was being incredibly careless and should have just stayed in school, gone to the library for god’s sakes. Something logical. But in the wake of his dizzying gasps, sharp sobs rippling upwards through his chest as he truly clued in to the situation he seemed to be in, to the words that he couldn’t block out of his head, Will Byers started walking with the intention of never stopping.

He walked for a good long while, taking in his surroundings as he desperately tried to calm the hammering of his heart against the inside of his chest. He’d rushed himself down through downtown and through what he thought he remembered to be the long stretch of road that eventually led home, and carried on through there, walking for well over an hour. His mind was absolutely swimming with

thoughts clouded by his anger and hurt, bitter thoughts passing through as he couldn't seem to block what Blue had said out of his mind.

God, Will had thought to himself as he stared down the absolutely landmark-less stretch of road he was on, lined by a thick wall of trees on either side. *God, how can I like somebody like that?*

As he carried on walking, wind whipping at his already reddened cheeks, the answer came to him rather simply. *Because Blue wasn't like that. He wasn't, was he?* Will knew deep down that Blue was hurting, and some part of him, even through his own pain, understood. It hurt, still. Nonetheless.

Another thought passed Will as he carried on down the road, one that settled deep into the pit of his stomach: he had no idea where he really was.

When he had left town, he was sure he had taken the proper road, and he was still almost entirely positive that he was close to home, having observed the route that Jonathan took to get him to school several times if only half-heartedly, but nothing stuck out to him that might indicate that he was going the right way. Instead of the sense of panic he had held that day in the woods behind Blue's house, however, Will almost felt calm in this realization. That for once, nobody knew exactly where he was in that moment. He was lost, missing for all anyone knew, and he couldn't even pinpoint exactly where he was. Freeing and terrifying, both at the exact same time.

Will caught a sense of where he was, however, when he carried on a bit down the street, taking note of a wide open path that seemed to dive into the woods to the right of him. He slid his backpack straps

tighter over his shoulders, planning on walking right past it before something caught his eye.

If he had kept walking, he likely wouldn't have thought twice to look at the broken pieces of underbrush that seemed to have been torn up, like something had gone tumbling through it. If he hadn't seen the thin slivers of what appeared to be shattered plastic from a headlight, barely visible under the thin layer of half melted snow, he would have continued on as well.

But what really stopped him, what really made him pause and realize where he had taken himself, was the sight of the overturned bicycle with its front wheel bent inwards at an ugly angle, thin red stripes painted along the slowly rusting metal with a faint 'W.B' scratched into the metal pole beneath the bike seat.

9. upside down

Notes for the Chapter:

Before this chapter starts, I'd like to address something.

The support I've been receiving from friends and strangers over the past week had been just as overwhelming as it had been amazing. I am so grateful for every single one of your comments, on Twitter, CC, or even in the comments here. So from the bottom of my heart, THANK YOU. You keep me writing. You keep me inspired.

This chapter means a LOT to me, and I've been talking about it for a couple days because this chapter is my favourite out of the entire fic. A lot of my own experiences are reflected in this chapter, and reading it over again makes me tear up all over again. I hope you enjoy it just as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Here it is.

It was nearly full dark before Will heard the gentle blips of a police cruiser coasting down the road behind him.

He was amazed, and horrified just as much, at the way the tiny little stretch of land had practically drawn him in like a magnet. He hadn't even intended to go out looking for such a spot, and he certainly hadn't wanted to visit at any point since his return home. Yet, it was almost like his body carried him on this way even if he wasn't sure it was the right way home. It was, indeed, the right way. He'd come this way on the night of November 6th, the night that fell into his brain like a painted over puzzle piece, still fitting but never quite looking right. He understood that this was the place.

Yes, of course it was, he thought to himself. This was the route he had attempted to take the night that he had fallen and knocked

himself into that short, bitter unconsciousness that lasted several days. Beneath his feet were the rocks that wiped him clean. *This is it, isn't it? This was where Will Byers died*, Will thought to himself as he had approached the twisted metal form that was (*had been*) his bicycle, and as his fingertips grazed the smashed in remnants of the light that had been installed between his handlebars, he began to cry.

He had sat like that for a while, sitting with his backpack underneath his feet and his tailbone resting poorly on the incline of the gravel ditch behind him. He had the jagged shards of plastic that had been shattered out of the bike's light fixture cupped inside his palms, tears dotting his cheeks for god knows how long until he realized that he could barely see the pieces he had clutched so tightly in his hands. It had grown dark quickly, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He just sat there until his cheeks grew dry and he couldn't cry any longer. His posture grew more limp as the moments went by, and he could feel exhaustion working its way into his bones. A lot of crying in one day for just a young man, he had thought to himself. A lot of crying for someone who had done a lot of crying as it was.

He sat there until it was too dark to try and maneuver his way blindly through the path in front of him, and he sat there until it was dark enough that, when he craned his neck back a bit, he could look upwards into the pitch black sky and see stars speckled across it. It hurt his neck, straining like this, but he could have sat there the entire night just watching the stars like that. The stars had nothing to do but be beautiful, nothing to do but guide on occasion. He wished he had nothing to do but be beautiful, sometimes. Life wasn't that easy, though. He knew that. He wished he had nothing else required of him than that, though. To look nice. He wished he didn't have to see his friends after this, briefly, and that thought made his stomach ache with guilt. He tipped his head back again, however, and observed the stars, and for a brief moment, he didn't feel so awful about the fact that his family, that his friends, Blue, Jonathan; out of all of them, nobody really knew where he was.

Except the cruiser that had turned the corner in that moment, lights flashing brightly atop its roof.

Will hadn't even noticed it at first, until the officer inside had flicked the lights into their on position and the dim stretch of road that had

barely been visible under the scarce amount of streetlights lining it lit up with circling hues of blue and red. Will's eyes were pinned on the constellations above him until he had heard the gentle yelps of the siren that he assumed had been played to get his attention. As he had dropped his head from it's stargazing position and peered down the road, Will was sure then that he had made a mistake.

Yet in some way, he wasn't afraid. He wasn't nervous, or scared. He didn't even feel little against the police as they approached. He didn't feel anything. For a moment, he'd thought that maybe he had cried all of his emotions out onto the gravel below him. In his aching tiredness, he wondered if kids could get arrested. He didn't know, and in a stupid, saddened laugh, he wondered if that was something he had known before.

By the time Will had drawn himself out of his thoughts, the cruiser had parked behind him and the lights, which had been sending rays of coloured light through the trees like sun through stained glass windows, had been shut off.

Only the headlights remained, just enough light slipping away from the street and into the pathway, even if they were faced away, to hardly illuminate the form of the bike in front of Will. He half expected the police officer to get tired of waiting for him to do something and leave, but as he ran a thumb over one of the tiny shards of plastic in his palm, a voice from behind Will nearly made him jump out of his skin, accompanied by the soft hiss of a car window being rolled down.

"Will Byers?" a gruff, patient voice spoke up from up on the road. The voice was kind, but Will imagined it held the air of someone who could be just as temperamental. He sounded older, as old as Will imagined a dad would be, and he almost held a patience that a dad's voice would, Will thought. Though his back was turned to the car, Will could imagine that the man was craning out of his window, trying to get a solid look at him. To make his observation a bit easier, Will thought, he turned his head towards the car, squinting slightly from the sudden brightness reflected on the road.

"What?" Will spoke slowly, unsure of whether *sir* was something he needed to say.

From inside the car, Will could see a faint red glow, fluctuating in the chilly night air like a light controlled by a dimmer. It took Will a moment to realize that this was the hot end of a cigarette, and as the smoldering dot grew bright briefly, a plume of smoke could be seen escaping the open car window.

“Are you gonna let me take you home to your mom, or are you gonna make me wait?” the man asked plainly, shrouded in the darkness of the car. Though the voice held a slight impatience, it more of an honest question than a sarcastic remark, and as Will strained to make out some sort of face beneath the blackness inside the car, it was like the officer had read his mind. Suddenly, the inside of the car was illuminated by a faint overhead light, and Will could finally get a somewhat good look at the officer inside of it.

Though the light highlighted most of the front seats quite well, the man’s face was still slightly shrouded in darkness on account of the large brimmed Sherriff’s hat that sat atop his head. From the features that Will could make out, the man was likely just as old as Will imagined his dad was, if not slightly older. His face was strong and his jaw was squared, faint stubble crisscrossing along his jawline like he hadn’t shaved for several days. He was adorned in what seemed to be a typical work uniform exempt the hat; a beige button up work shirt and pants, and atop his shirt pocket, though Will couldn’t make out the letters printed on it, there was a shiny Sherri’s badge.

“Well?” the man repeated, and though Will wanted to obey the officer in front of him, he found that he couldn’t make himself budge.

“... What if I don’t want to?” Will spoke up slowly, hesitance staining his words as he looked up into the open window of the cruiser. The cigarette situated between the cop’s lips twitched slightly, as if he was squaring his jaw in frustration. He sat like that for a moment, before he gave Will a tiny nod. With the subtle *ker-chink* sound of a door handle being opened, Will realized with sudden worry that the man was getting out of the car.

As Will watched him climb out of the car at a leisurely pace, he noticed that the officer was much taller than he had expected him to be. He had left the car on, oddly enough, and as Will watched the man begin a slow walk down the gentle incline towards him, Will

realized that he was probably coming down to usher him into the car. His stomach panged with a sense of anxiety that he couldn't quite place. As the cop closed in just a couple steps away from Will, the boy tensed.

"Don't make me go yet," Will urged suddenly, the words escaping his lips before he could really think about it. The cop didn't have to listen to him and he understood that, but some part of him felt like he needed to beg. He wasn't afraid of going back to see his mother, and he wasn't afraid of going back and having to see his friends. At least, not as much as he was afraid that he had to go back home and see more evidence of the person that he was. He was tired. Too tired to try and forget about what Blue had said to him when he knew he wouldn't be able to.

The cop had stopped walking, however, and was peering down at Will. He was silent only for a moment, before a quiet scoff escaped his mouth.

"I'm not going to make you do anythin', kid," he said in an unimpressed tone, stepping closer once more and crouching down a bit. Though Will instinctively shied away, he understood what the officer was doing once he let out a troubled grunt, sitting himself down a couple feet away from Will on the gravel beneath them. He let out a small huff, and as Will watched him, perplexed, he raised his head and surveyed Will in the half dark, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Y...You're not?" Will said slowly, surprise seeping into his tone.

"No, I'm not," the cop said simply, and from beside Will, as he shifted to get a bit more comfortable, the small tag on his shirt glinted against the light, which ran across the letters briskly, but not too quick that Will couldn't make out the name on it: *Hopper*.

Familiar, Will thought, the word bitter in his mind. Familiar was everything, and everything was familiar.

Familiar wasn't good enough.

"Hopper," Will said aloud, receiving a diluted response from the

officer as he tipped his head upwards. He peered over at the man, watching through the dark for some sort of reaction. He didn't get anything for several moments but the quiet action of the cop reaching down and putting out his cigarette in the dirt.

"Yeah?" The officer, Hopper, replied slowly, unmoving as he observed Will.

"That's you, right? Your name. It sounds familiar," Will explained suddenly, feeling a bit embarrassed by his sudden exclamation as he turned back towards the sight in front of him. His eyes needed to adjust to the dark once again.

"Your mom mighta' mentioned me before," Hopper said plainly, his voice less than unenthusiastic in an all business way. Will pressed his tongue hard against the back of his teeth as he stared into the dark before him. She hadn't mentioned the man since he'd gotten home from the hospital, and before that? Well.

"I wouldn't know," Will said slowly, his voice laced with subtle hurt as he grew quiet. The air almost seemed to thicken between them, and Will was working himself up to say something else, something relevant before Hopper had chimed in, his voice slow and quiet.

"What're you doin' out here, kid?" Hopper murmured, his voice gentle, thick with an honest curiosity. Will paused, lips half parted before he let them fall shut, eyes desperately trying to focus on the bike once more after having stared into the light for so long. It was there, clamoring for something to see, spotting the gentle glimmer of the shattered front light on his bike, that Will really stopped to think.

Why was he out there?

"...I don't know."

"... You just like hanging out in the cold for fun?"

Will dropped his head as his gaze fell into his lap, staring into his open palm cloaked in darkness. It wasn't easy to think about why he felt like he needed to stay out there, to keep himself from going home. If he was going home, he was going to have to go home as

somebody else, not the somebody he'd been trying to be. He couldn't go home and pretend like he knew himself and who he was. If he was going home, he had to be honest. About everything. Honest about the fact that while he was relearning the coding that made him who he was, he was learning other things about himself too. Things the old Will likely knew all too well.

"I just... I got upset and I ruined everything and I just... don't want to have to explain myself. I feel like I'm always apologizing because I can't explain what I want or who I am... I feel like..." Will swallowed hard, shaking his head as his words felt like they were welling up inside his throat. He hated feeling like he was speaking to a counsellor, to an adult or somebody that didn't want to hear his type of sob story. But Hopper had sat down next to him, hadn't he? He didn't have to stay, but Will had to say something.

"I feel like I'm upside down, and everybody is angry with me because I can't figure things out. About me, or about them... I don't know why I'm here but it feels like this is where I need to be right now, and that's enough for me. I doubt anybody wants to see me right now anyways," Will exhaled sharply, his voice capturing only a slight, damaged whine as he furrowed his brows, his vision finally adjusting enough that he could see the bike in front of him once more. He observed the crooked bend in the handlebars for the millionth time it seemed, watching anything but the cop next to him.

"You don't think your mom wants to see you right now?" Hopper questioned, his tone a bit dumbfounded as he leaned further forward on his knees, like he was trying to get a good look at Will. Will could feel his throat tightening.

"That's not what I *meant*."

"You said that you think *nobody* wants to see you."

"I don't think my *friends* want to see me," Will pressed shortly, his tone growing slightly more tense as he stuffed the remnants of the shattered bike light into his coat pocket and wrapped his fingers around his kneecaps.

"You're worried about your friends right now?" Hopper spoke in a

rather unimpressed tone, and something about the way he had said it ate away at Will.

“Yes, I’m worried about my friends!” He had yelped, inhaling sharply as his fingertips pressed tightly into his kneecaps.

“Which is stupid, because they wouldn’t be worried about me, *would* they? They’re *tired* of me! They said so themselves! So maybe I should stop worrying about what they think. Maybe I should say ‘screw them’ and... and...” Will had rushed, his left hand driving down into the gravel underneath him as he explained himself breathlessly. Was he even allowed to talk to a police officer like that? Did he care that much? Only as he grew more and more frustrated did he realize he had beaten his own odds: through his anger, he could feel his vision blurring again. He wouldn’t let them fall this time, though, and to prevent such an act Will tipped his head back yet again.

He wouldn’t cry. Not if he could help it. Will Byers was many things, and maybe a cry baby was one of them. But not then. Not in front of a cop, he thought. As if that gave him incentive.

The air grew heavy for several moments, as the two of them soaked up the words that had just escaped his mouth. After a couple seconds, Hopper cleared his throat.

“Maybe you need new friends,” Hopper suggested, his words strained as he tipped his head upwards as well, mirroring Will’s movement. Will could tell Hopper was struggling to understand where he was coming from, but deep, deep down he appreciated the effort. From where he was angled, Will could look up and see the stars hovering above him. He didn’t want new friends. Maybe he needed them, though. Maybe he needed new friends. A new friend. But he didn’t want it.

“He told me that he was tired of wondering if I was going to remember him or not... like *he* was the only one who was upset about this...” Will whispered suddenly, the words dripping from his lips like a poison. They stung just as much coming from his own tongue as they had when he’d heard Blue say them. He had never wished pain upon anybody, but in that moment, Will hoped in vain

that those words had hurt Blue just as much as they'd hurt him.

"This friend of yours. He said that to you?"

Will nodded.

"Is *that* why you ran off?" Hopper asked, expecting an honest answer as he twisted towards Will slightly.

With hesitation, but understanding the need to be honest (was it illegal to lie to a cop?) to both Hopper and himself, Will nodded once more.

Hopper sat up slightly from beside Will, elbows leaving his kneecaps as he placed his palms face down on them. He seemed like he was thinking hard for a moment, inhaling and exhaling the cool winter air like he was waiting for some kind of epiphany. After several moments, Hopper let out a long sigh, the man's breath wafting upwards into the cold air in a smoke-like plume.

"Listen to me, because my ass is getting cold and you sound like you need it. Okay? Your friends are hurting. You're hurting too, doesn't take an expert to see that. What he's saying, these things he's telling you: he's only saying them because he loves you, kid. I don't know 'em, and I very well may never know 'em. But I can tell you this; he wouldn't be stressing himself out so bad if he didn't care," Hopper spoke, seemingly sure of his words as he watched Will for any sort of a reaction. When he didn't respond, Hopper continued.

"There's a difference between hurting people because you feel like it, or because you can, and unintentionally projecting your pain onto people because you care about them," Hopper spoke slowly but confidently, placing his palms flat against each other and rubbing them gently together as though he was trying to conserve any amount of heat that he could hold.

"They're a hard set of twins to separate. But don't let his words haunt ya, kid. Besides; if I'm wrong and he tries this again, tell him you've got a cop waitin' to kick his butt. You copy?" Hopper finished gruffly, peering over at Will and watching at the small boy nodded, his eyes never leaving the stars as a weak, melancholic smile crossed his lips.

“I.... I copy.”

He understood, of course. It didn't dull the sting but it gave the sting an understandable cause, and that felt better than nothing. He would carry on giving Blue the benefit of the doubt if he wanted to or not, but he wasn't going to call the boy. He'd wait by the phone, shamefully at that, but he wouldn't call. Yet, he still wasn't safe from his fears, and though the pain those words had drilled into him was numbed for a moment, his anxiety took another shape.

The only fear that was settling in his stomach now was in the shape of his home, chiselling harsh realities into his gut. Because he did have to go home honest. He didn't have anything more to lose in that moment than his mom and his brother, but maybe that made it all the scarier. It was time, Will thought to himself, knowing deep down in his chest that it needed to happen. He had to be out there for a reason, procrastinating, waiting. If he understood Blue, then what else could there be to come to terms with?

Will had to go home and tell Joyce the truth, or not go home at all. If he wanted to be fair to himself. If he wanted to heal. That's how it had to go.

“Byers?”

Snapping out of his thought process, Will spoke up momentarily, as he noticed his fingers were trembling against his kneecaps.

“Yes?”

“You gonna let me take you home now?”

Through concentrated movements, Will nodded his head in agreement and stood up slowly from the gravel, the backs of his legs and his bottom sore from the sharp rocks he'd been resting on for hours at that point. He watched patiently as Hopper maneuvered himself into a standing position, letting out a sore-sounding grunt as he stretched his back and straightened. As he began up the hill, Will took his time climbing up the slope after him, gravel rustling beneath his sneakers as he stepped up next to the cruiser. Observing the tacky brownish yellow paint that coated it's sides, Will rounded the car to

the passenger's seat, only pulling open the door once Hopper had done so himself. His fingers were trembling still, wrapped around the door handle as he tugged it open carefully and climbed inside, the dull scent of cigarette smoke gracing his senses. No matter how much he seemed to press himself into the seat back, though, no matter how much Will tried to distract himself, a confused anger still bubbled inside of him.

Because Will wanted to hate Blue.

He wanted to hate him for treating Will like he *wanted* his life to fall into line like this; into a consistent path of forgetting and losing track of names and faces and places he had been. The scorned paladin and the cleric with a trackless mind; best friends at some point, Will had been told, but he was finding it hard to believe. Best friends didn't treat each other like this, but Will couldn't bring himself to hate Blue. He couldn't even find it in himself to dislike him, even temporarily. He found that even sitting there, pushing himself back into Hopper's passenger seat like he wanted to disappear into the fabric, Will was primarily angry because he wanted to see him, even after what he had said. Best friends didn't treat each other like that, but they didn't look at each other the way Will and Blue did either.

No, Will didn't hate him.

Will Byers liked Blue.

Out of all the colors under his rainbow, Will liked Blue the *best*.

For the entire car ride, Will's hands never stopped shaking. And to his fear as they had turned into the Byers' property, nerves already shot to shit, Joyce had been anxiously sitting out on the front porch waiting for the two of them to arrive. Will wondered, with a sinking heart, how long his mother might have sat out there waiting if he hadn't let Hopper take him home. For all she knew, Will thought sickly, he could have gotten hurt again.

Or worse.

Will had climbed out of the car quickly, his heart hammering against his chest like it wanted to break right through his ribcage. He was expecting a good solid earful, a lot of questions about where he had been and who he had been with, what had happened, did someone hurt him? He expected it all, but to his sudden realization, he got none of that. Not then.

As Joyce had spotted her son stepping out of the passenger's side of the cruiser, Will could see her face morph from a look of pure remorse to one of tearful relief. The cigarette she had propped against her knee was dropped as if it was nothing into the damp evening grass, and she had thrown herself up from a sitting position so quickly Will had wondered if she might fall over. Tears, like they had been in position for centuries, immediately pooled against his eyes and dripped down his cheeks, and he hadn't realized he'd broken into a run until he was rushing past the headlights of the car that had been illuminating the deck, toppling into his mother's arms like a landslide.

Joyce had held her ground, her relieved sobs slicing through the winter air like a razorblade as she wrapped her arms tightly around Will, encasing him against her chest as he began to weep. He hadn't realized how much he had missed her, how much he had really cared about getting home until he had gotten there. He had wrapped his arms around his mother in return, completely shutting out everything else that laid outside of them.

Hopper, the cruiser, the house and the trees surrounding the property all became de-constructible paper shapes inside of his brain, nonexistent to him as he pressed his forehead into his mother's shoulder. He hadn't been able to stop pouring himself out into her

arms from the moment she had embraced him, and once he had opened the floodgates, there was nothing he could do to stop himself. He had spoken those words in every single way that he could, throwing it out there into the night air in terrified whispers like he was pouring his secrets into a bottle.

Every way that the statement could be said, he had said it and apologized for it in return, and he gripped onto her arms so tightly he thought he might break, his breathing escaping his lips in choked sobs only. He was terrified, of what? Of himself? Of the so far, so distant memories of what the mere suggestion of his being had gotten him before? Will didn't know why he was scared of being gay, and he didn't understand why he felt like he should be. Why he felt like it had been engraved into his soul, and when such a thing could have happened. Yet as he laid cradled in his mothers' arms, the two of them clinging to each other like nobody else in the entire world existed, Will had told her what he was, and why he thought he should be sorry for it.

He had given himself up, and in eight short words, Joyce Byers saved her son.

"I know, baby. It's okay. I love you."

For the first time since he had been released from the hospital, in that moment, standing in the dirt drive of their home with the police cruiser's lights still cutting through their silhouettes, Will Byers knew *home. He knew true, unbridled love. And god, it was blissful.*

10. cranial dissonance

17.

Will had counted 17 bright orange cars since he had taken a seat next to the large glass window that was installed just outside of his doctor's office that early Friday afternoon, and he was quickly discovering another one of his "Will Byers Facts": Will Byers was good at multitasking.

Though he was still a bit drowsy from his lack of sleep the night before, Will was quite capable of paying full attention to the conversation that was supposed to be out of his earshot as he catalogued the sights the streets below were granting him. He had seen a couple people arguing just outside the hospital's front doors, and he had seen multiple people drive rather recklessly around each other down on the main road that stretched out in front of the building he was in. And he had counted 17 orange cars, tapping his fingers patiently against his jean-clad kneecap as he added another to his tally, watching as it coasted down the drive with ease.

It had only been a few hours since he had dressed himself into a chilly, stiff hospital gown and settled into the long stretch of the machine that haunted his dreams, and his own head. It was mystical to him; a foreseer of sorts that could ultimately send his life into a crippling and splintering state, or it could resurrect him. Bring him back to the way he had been, to the person he had been and at least, in some way, relieve him while he waited for such a magical event to take place.

He had stared up into the crescent shaped roof of the machine, staying just as still he could as he thought, in such a vicious terror that he had to stiffen a bit to keep from shaking, about what the results might bring him. They could kill him or set him free, and when he truly thought about it without any exterior suggestions, he really wasn't sure if he wanted either one more than the other. With this came another realization.

Will Byers hated going to see the doctor.

He had gotten redressed into his own clothing, more comfortable but still so unsettled, when the doctor had finally called for his mother to enter his office so they could discuss the results. Joyce had cautiously turned towards Will, shooting a passing look out the large glass window as she had twisted around to speak to him.

"We won't be too long, okay?" Joyce had assured him, seemingly unsure herself as she pressed her lips together and shot a brief look around the room. It was a stark white, spic and span just like a hospital was expected to be. This meant, in return, that there was really nothing for Will to do while he was waiting anxiously in his seat, and Will assumed, in some embarrassed but understanding way, that Joyce might have been worrying that he would decide to take a stroll somewhere and get himself lost again. They both knew that he'd done enough of that since he'd gotten back home.

"Here's a little game. Why don't you—" Joyce paused, gesturing out the window as she carried on, "—why don't you see how many orange cars you can count driving by while you wait? Or red, or blue, or—whatever you'd like," she said softly, giving her son a timid smile as her hand reached up to ruffle his hair, fingertips brushing his shoulder lovingly as she turned away and entered the doctor's office, only pulling the door $\frac{3}{4}$ closed as though that might prevent Will

from hearing what they were saying. He was, virtually, left alone in that waiting room then, and for a moment, Will was actually startled by how silent the whole place seemed to be. Too silent for a hospital, he had thought to himself, before turning to look out the window and into the parking lot and streets below.

He hadn't really been listening intently when he first heard his mother's voice, her tone hushed under a cloud of nervousness as he peered out the window. In reality, he hadn't even been focusing on counting the cars, and in the end, as he let his fingers keep track of the ones he noted, he would wonder if he had counted them wrong all along. His mind had been wandering like a dog without a leash, weaving and dipping through different stories he'd heard over the weeks before and it had wandered, like it always did and always would, to that one familiar face that he couldn't quite drive out of his head; Blue.

It had only been a week and a half since they had argued and, hand in hand, a week and a half since the two of them had spoken. Blue had called, of course, and Will had stayed shrouded in his room, unable to face speaking to the boy without sinking into a puddle. He wasn't afraid, no, he had no reason to be. Not afraid of Blue. Afraid of what he might say to him.

What he might admit.

And so, it had been a silent week and a half since Will had run out on Blue that day and since, Will had discovered via his own mother, Blue had called Joyce to tell her that Will had left the school and that he didn't know where the boy had gone that night. When Joyce had brought it up to him, after the dust had settled and they had endured a long, dizzying conversation about Will and what was going on inside his brain, she had mentioned to him that Blue had sounded

extremely upset on the phone. When she asked Will if something had happened between them, Will had simply shaken his head like a robot, too tired to explain the entire goings-on that had taken place. Joyce had looked at him, given him a trying smile and nodded in acceptance.

“You don’t have to tell me. I’m a mom, I can sense this stuff,” she had begun simply, her eyes fixated on Will’s face, “but he sounded pretty shaken. I think if heart break had its own voice, it would have sounded just like him.”

Those words had kept Will awake that night.

As he had stared at the ceiling, Will wondered about the state of Blue’s heart. He wondered how broken it was. He wondered, as the ceiling began to grow fuzzy and bleak underneath his tired eyes, if Blue worried about Will’s heart, too.

When he caught himself thinking about Blue as he was supposed to be counting the cars outside, Will pressed his tongue against the back of his teeth hard, callous frustration creeping up on him. It was subconscious, a passing wonder that always seemed to catch against the edges of his train of thought. He had wanted to pretend that he didn’t care, that he hadn’t admitted to himself his feelings and that he could ignore them as much as he cared to. In truth, though, it didn’t work like that. As he thought about Blue, a brief idea, a vibrant flashing word crossed the back of his mind, and Will had truly paused all his tasks, focusing for a moment to remember where he’d seen it before. It didn’t take him too long, and as he nestled himself into the cushion of his seat a bit more, Will remembered the way the words had shimmered in cheap blue glittery paint against the soft brown banner paper that had been strung up in the cafeteria.

The Snow Ball.

“Can you put it in simpler terms, please?” Joyce had whispered, just a bit too loud to keep what she was saying to herself as Will sat just outside of the office door, back pressed to the thin white polished wall as he gazed out the window. He’d been counting the cars for almost as long as he had been sitting there, waiting patiently for them to finish, but ever so impatiently at the same time for his mother to say something in a different tone, in anything that was more than a barely audible mumble that he had to struggle to hear.

Will thought hard to himself, as he sat there and counted and counted and watched the traffic drift by as people hurried on through their days towards tasks and places that needed to be tended to. For the first time in a while, as he gazed down at the people trailing down the sidewalk like ants marching in a row, Will didn’t feel so small.

He thought about the Snow Ball, and for some reason, the mere idea of it made him a bit ill. He knew exactly why, though he tried to shove the idea out of his mind as he aimed to put his focus elsewhere. He did no such thing, however, and he found himself dripping into a dreamy daze that he imagined the young girls at his school could all relate to. He dreamt about the sparkling decorations, about the dazzling shades of blue and paper snowflakes dancing from above the gymnasium floor and streamers twisting back and forth across the ceiling. He dreamt about good music, his definition of good music, and he dreamt about feet shuffling across polished floors and glitter and the warmth of the gym heaters and dancing with Blue.

Will's stomach dropped, and that sickening feeling only grew worse by the second.

Dreaming is where that idea ends, he thought to himself, slipping into a piteous little hole in his mind space. He would never get to dance with Blue. There were so many steps that had to be taken for something of that grandeur to happen. And even if it did...

It wouldn't, though, Will thought. *There's no point dwelling on a dream that won't come true*. He could have been sick right then and there from the sheer upset that swelled inside of him if he hadn't stopped to listen to the supposed-to-be quiet conversation inside the office behind him.

"Well, I'm looking at these scans here, and I just want you to understand what you're seeing right now," Will heard his doctor speak in a low tone from beyond the slightly ajar office door, his stomach twisting into knots as his fingers began to fiddle. *This might be it for me*, Will thought to himself, like a knight riding off to face a life or death battle. *I'm either going to come out of this new or I'm going to be who I was. I'm either going to remember or keep forgetting, right? That's how it works*, Will thought to himself.

"You commented that Will hasn't really shown you much change in terms of remembering childhood memories, even memories of events that happened within the past couple years?" the doctor's voice traveled out into the empty waiting room, the only sound echoing through it that kept it from resembling an abandoned space being Will's foot tapping gently against the metal leg of his chair.

It was true, he couldn't remember anything, and he was well aware of that. Joyce had even given him a try in the car on the way there,

and he hadn't been able to cling to anything personally that she had said. He had however experienced *something*, and he wasn't quite sure if it counted. It wasn't *remembering*, no, but Joyce had turned towards him, with a cautious, motherly smile on her face, and she had started telling him the story about the first time they went skating when he was 10, and something *shifted*. Like a brick wall giving way for something else.

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"We went skating down at the quarry that one year, remember that?" Joyce had begun as they had just turned out onto the main road from the small dirt one that led up to their property. She had spun just slightly towards him, almost as if she was gauging his reaction to see if anything was clicking inside the chambers of his brain. He could only feign a weak smile, however, and as he watched her smile falter for a second, he felt the sharp heat of embarrassment cross through his body.

She had been different since the night he'd run off. A bit more nervous, but also much less afraid in a larger sense, in Will's eyes. She seemed less tired, more accepting of the situation at hand and more accepting of, well, everything that he had told her. They hadn't needed to say much more than what they'd whispered to each other out on the porch shrouded in Hopper's headlights that evening, but they had talked enough for Will to understand, as much as he had cried and cried over it, that he hadn't done anything bad.

He wasn't quite sure why he'd even thought he had in the first place. It came from somewhere deeper inside him, and it was learned, he could tell. He could tell because it didn't feel right inside of him. But since that evening, Joyce had changed, and so when Will didn't show any signs of a flooding remembrance, she accepted it easily with a

quick turn back towards the road.

“I... Sorry, I know. You were just ten, and you and Jonathan had begged me so bad to take you both skating that I just couldn’t say no,” Joyce had cooed as her eyes fixated on the road in front of them, fingers drumming against the steering wheel.

“I think you two could have stayed out there for hours on end, just skating and laughing and having the absolute best time. I never had to worry about you two, you know? You were both always so good... still are...” she whispered, tucking hair away from her eyes.

“But there was this little girl, I don’t remember her name, maybe you didn’t even know her back then. But she fell pretty hard and she was crying... so much. And you didn’t even think twice, baby. You just skated right on up to her and helped her back up, and...” Joyce shook her head slightly, not in a dismissive way but rather in a way that seemed to show just how amazed she was with her son.

“You wouldn’t let her alone until you got her to laugh. That didn’t take very long, either. And I remember you stayed with her until we left, just helping her skate and making sure she had somebody to hold onto while she got her courage back up,” Joyce finished sweetly, a somewhat melancholic smile passing across her lips as she watched the road before her. She hadn’t checked to see if anything had clicked in Will’s mind or not, assuming that he’d finished listening with the same head space. Yet about halfway through, something had slid into place in his mind, and his fingers, previously dangling easily through the loop in the handle on the door, had clenched the plastic so hard he could feel his fingertips growing cold.

It wasn’t a memory, but a feeling. A true wave of nostalgia washed

over him, even if he couldn't understand where it was coming from. He could practically feel the ice pressed against the palms of his hands, the smell of fresh snow flooding his nostrils like he really was out on the ice that very second. It wasn't a memory, though, was it? He wouldn't have been able to remember that story on his own, and even through this bold experience, he still didn't recognize his mother's retelling. Some part of him felt like he knew of a time when he did, though. It was a blind reconnaissance, hardly a memory but almost there. A finger's distance away from his reach.

He wanted to remember, *fully*. He feared that he never would.

-

"No, he... he hasn't, but... what's this, this right here--" Joyce insisted, and Will could picture his mother leaning forward in a tight hipped, metal framed chair like the one he was so tightly seated in. He could sense the fear in her voice, even if he had to strain to hear her sentence. He could feel it, almost, sinking into his own veins like molten copper, hardening as he heard them carry on in their quiet, guilty whispers.

Will was plenty used to things not going just right for him at this point; it was one of the things he had grown accustomed to in the past month. He never seemed to get quite used to the feeling it gave him, though; when things went wrong. They seemed to favour silent moments, delicate time periods just after Will would have started to think that he was finally getting better, getting into the groove of things and finding a spot in the sensitive jigsaw puzzle that was his place in the world. Everything had been going alright, even if he

hadn't spoken to Blue since that emotional night. He'd finally admitted to himself what needed to be admitted. He had finally started to grow accustomed to the body, the mind that he was living in. Ready to regrow, and to put things back together.

That, of course, was prime time for things to get worse.

They snuck in ever so quiet, the bad times; thick like ink in the form of minor things. Ways that his friends seemed to reflect their worries in their tired faces; faces too tired to belong to young teenagers. Ways that his mother observed his mannerisms like he was being tested. Everyone was adjusting like he was. The scary part was, even though they all reflected their fears for him in secret little slips, they all seemed to be adapting to the new Will better than he was, and he had thought that he'd been doing well.

Will could feel his stomach churning, his brain growing fuzzier by the second.

"That's the thing," Will heard the doctor speak up from inside of his office, and Will's eyes darted around the room, desperate for the familiar sight that he was searching for. He knew what was coming, god, he had prepared for it. Nothing felt quite like the reality of it, though. Palms sweating, he grew desperate.

"That's the thing, you've seen this before in previous appointments because the scans don't show really any change from the night he was brought in here," Will could hear him speak through the hollow echoing that had begun in his ear drums, and he had risen from his chair, nearly toppling forward as he rushed across the room towards the garbage can, glistening like a beacon near the main doors.

As Will collapsed to his knees, fingers wrapping around the edge of the can, he retched painfully as his eyes began to water. From behind him, he heard the last thing he wanted to hear. The one thing he had been expecting, but not quite prepared for.

“The reality is, though we can never be one hundred percent sure... it seems likely your son’s memory loss may very well be permanent,” the doctor admitted, and the silence that echoed through the office as his words hung heavy in the air was almost deafening.

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The ride home from the hospital had been agonizing, mostly because both Will and Joyce were drenched in a silence that neither of them were willing to break.

He could tell that his mother wanted to cry, that she wouldn’t until she was alone and that she would act like everything was fine, like there was still some hope that they could cling onto. After getting sick in the office, Will felt like he had emptied out all of his emotions with him. He sat peacefully, or as peacefully as he could, in the car next to his mother, feeling hollow like a drum as he stared forward down the dirt road that led to their home. He was two things at once, two things that he didn’t think could coexist together at once in a human body. He was both agonizingly sick of the idea of permanent emptiness, and he was completely apathetic towards the entire thing. *Maybe I’ve cried all my emotions out*, Will had thought to himself as Joyce pulled the car to a stop, rubbing his thumb against the leather interior of the car. *Maybe I’ve got nothing left to feel.*

Will took no time escaping to his room before his mother had even forged enough strength to climb out of the car. Will had hopped out almost immediately, abandoning his jacket by the door as he had wandered down the hallway, taking in every single detail of the wooden panelling like he'd just seen it for the first time. It felt different, now, the house; like there was less hope surrounding the place. Like now he knew that he wouldn't see it the way he used to.

Only the way he had learned.

His stomach turned once more, and he brushed past the hallway, retreating into his bedroom and pausing in the doorway for only a moment as his gaze wandered. His posters, his bed sheets and his trinkets, his clothing and even the carpet; they had all seemed so familiar, and with a bitter rush, Will wondered if that was all that they would ever be.

He'd made a rule for himself, that night he had ran away. He thought about his rule as he backed out of his bedroom and padded across the floor towards the home phone that was rigged up to the wall outside of their living room. He wasn't going to call Blue, he had said to himself, until *he* had called *Will* first. And in a way, Will hadn't broken this rule; Blue had called, oh, many times since that night, and each time Will had acted as though he wasn't home, ignoring the consistent rings as he cooped himself up in his room. So in a way, as he stood in front of the home phone with the phone itself placed against his ear, that gentle buzz of the line connecting ringing in his head, he hadn't broken his rule. He just had to initiate his part.

The line picked up almost immediately.

A couple scattered pieces of buzzing came through the line, but only a moment before a voice broke through.

“Will?” Blue spoke on the other end, his voice one of concern and concentration. A rush blasted through Will, and he placed a hand against the wall as he took a moment to stabilize. He felt like he’d had the air sucked right out of his lungs, and he might not have even answered if Blue hadn’t spoken up so quickly again. It wasn’t painful. It didn’t hurt. Will understood what was going on.

He had missed Blue ferociously, and the sound of his voice was like a jab of pure adrenaline.

“Will...? Mrs. Byers?” Blue squeaked on the other end, and Will cleared his throat, reminiscent of the hours before and what he had called for. He opened his mouth, but only a tiny choked noise came out. He shook his head, clearing his throat once more and leaning into the wall.

“Hey,” Will spoke quietly, listening intently for any sound Blue might make. The boy took no time to take off.

“Will! Jesus, I... I was so worried about you. I mean, I tried calling but I... listen, okay? I’m really.... Will, I’m really sorry for everything. For this whole thing. I—“ Blue carried on, his voice urgent as though he’d been plugging this whole thing up for the near two weeks that Will hadn’t spoken to him. He couldn’t handle it, though, and found that he was cutting into Blue’s words quickly, already becoming tense by the knowledge of what had to come.

“It’s fine, Blue. We were both upset, okay? It’s okay. I just—“ Will shook his head to himself, licking his lips as the words threatened to cross them. He had grown silent, and through his quiet, Blue had

broken the tension between them once again.

“Will?”

“Where are you right now?” Will asked.

Though this question didn’t take much thought, Blue audibly paused.

“I’m... I’m home. W...why?” Blue asked, his voice ripe with confusion.

“Come to the quarry. In... In an hour. You, Dustin and Lucas,” Will spoke slowly into the phone, as though he was figuring this out for himself at the same time that he was telling Blue.

From where he was standing, pulling the phone away from his ear for only a moment before bringing it back, Will noticed that his hands were trembling.

“We need to talk. Right away,” Will whispered.

11. mid december dips

Notes for the Chapter:

Just a little note: a tad bit of violence. Nothing graphic, really. Enjoy.

Between the thick trunked oak trees that lined the manmade path through the woods down towards the quarry, only the soft whistles of the youngest Byers boy could be heard between the off beat chirps and caws of the last remaining birds in Hawkins. For those brief moments, there was peace. There was calm in a way that wasn't caused by deafening, painful realization.

For those brief moments before the storm, Will Byers was at peace.

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After Will had gotten off the phone with Blue, he had paused in the dim open concept dining room of his home and taken in the silence that absolutely smothered the entire house. Tension felt almost corporeal, thick enough that it almost seemed to drench every piece of furniture in the house, soaking into Will's soul and being as he stepped away from the phone. He could hear the gentle, in time clicks of the wall clock in their dining room ticking away at a steady pace, but that was about it.

Abandoned, Will thought to himself. *That's the word I'm looking for.* It was so quiet it seemed *abandoned*.

Taking a couple tentative steps towards the opening of the hallway, Will kept his attention sharp and his ears alert as he listened for any sign of another living being in the home. It wasn't like he needed to figure it out: he knew his mother was home with him. She had drifted into the house like a ghost after Will and disappeared into her bedroom down the hall as he had made his phone call, and since he had slid the receiver back into its holder, not a sound had come from any of the rooms in the house. He didn't need to hear anything to know exactly what was going on, however, and he could feel a sense of staggering hurt coursing through him. Joyce didn't have to make any noise, any signal of her presence for Will to understand that she needed to be alone.

Down the hall, on the edge of her bed, illuminated in only the cloudy, quickly dwindling sunlight streaming through her bedroom window, Joyce was likely crying. Not for herself, not in mourning, but in knowledge of the life her son may never remember. Down the hall from her, standing out in the open, Will's heart broke a little bit, too.

Before he could even consider tiptoeing his way down the hall, the gentle sound of footsteps outside the front door on the concrete porch steps snapped Will back into the present, and he remembered the date he had just set for himself. Stepping back away from the hallway and giving it one last parting glance before he left, Will turned back towards the front door just as the door handle twisted open and the thin frame of Will's older brother stepped into the foyer, chilled air spilling into the house behind him as he hurried to shut it.

Jonathan only paused just as he pressed his shoulder into the door, listening as it gave a 'clunk' of confirmation as he turned back towards the inside of their home and noticed Will standing there, as though he'd been waiting.

"Hey, Will," Jonathan said quietly, giving his brother a passing smile

as he slid his backpack off of his shoulder and hung it off the back of one of the chairs that were pushed into the dining room table. He began to wrestle with the camera strap around his neck. Reaching up and looping a couple fingers around the collar of his t-shirt, Will watched his brother in silence for a moment before his quandaries got the best of him.

“Jonathan?” Will murmured, waiting until his brother pulled his camera off his neck and set it gently on the counter before he expected any response.

“Yeah?” Jonathan asked, back to Will as he began to dig through his bag slowly, searching for something that he couldn’t seem to find. Only after several seconds did he dig out a couple small school books and a pencil, pausing as he didn’t receive another response from Will and twisting back around to face his younger brother.

Will was fidgeting, messing with his hands nervously as he watched Jonathan move. Once his brother had stopped, however, he was reminded of how suddenly quiet he had become. Clearing his throat, Will shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“I need you to drive me to the path by the quarry,” Will spoke up softly, his voice delicate and unsure as the two of them watched each other with equally testing gazes. Jonathan was the first between them to break the stare and glance down the hallway. Will didn’t need to hear his brother speak out loud to know exactly what he was thinking.

The space between the two brothers and their mother seemed endless, like they were miles away from her with nowhere to go. As the silence between them grew and filled the room, Jonathan found

he didn't even need to ask any questions about what was happening. Staring down after a moment, Jonathan spotted their mother's abandoned keys on the hard wood surface of the kitchen table.

"Please," Will whispered, watching as Jonathan slid a finger through the key ring.

The drive there had been brief, and the walk through the slightly damp woodland path has felt like it had whizzed by even quicker, even as Will subconsciously attempted to take as much time as he could. He liked the way the woods felt on days like these: days just after warmth in the winter, when snow was melting and leaves were dripping with cool, clean remnants of a previous storm. His whistles were slow, calculated; tunes that he had heard Jonathan play on his stereo system over the past several weeks, or little tiny snippets of songs he had heard on the radio on his drives to school that had caught his attention. Something to keep him company on his short traipse through the woods, even if it had been much quicker than he had wished it to be. Bidding farewell to the thick underbrush in exchange for the wide open gravel plane that surrounded the quarry, Will slipped out of the forest and onto the damp rocky ground outside of it.

He'd only gotten a good look at the quarry once or twice since he had been back home from the hospital, and even then, the four boys never seemed to stay very long before it got too cold to be hanging around such a place that was so close to the water. Will imagined, as he listened to the crunch of his sneakers against the dirt beneath him, that the quarry must be a pretty beautiful place to be in the summertime when all the birds were back and the sun was reflecting off of the serene water below. This was another thing that Will discovered about himself, as he crossed the threshold that was the raised barrier around the body of water below and peered down into the turquoise coloured abyss: he *hate, hate, hated heights*.

Peering over the edge of the quarry wall felt like looking straight into the eyes of Death himself, and stepping back a couple inches, Will swallowed hard, trying his best to wish away the sickening feeling in his stomach. It was beautiful, he could admit: incredibly. He imagined that the quarry, in the summer, must have been a pretty popular spot to swim. But from such a daunting height as the one he was standing at, peering into the gaping mouth below, he wondered what kind of a life or death situation he was really in. He hadn't understood that he was in much more of a predicament than he thought, of course, and it had nothing to do with the water below him, really. If he'd been paying more attention, maybe he might have noticed the gentle sound of an extra pair of feet behind him. He might have noticed his own bad timing, as he had climbed out of the Byers' family car and trickled off into the woods as a familiar face had come riding by on their bike. He might have noticed all that if he'd been paying better attention, but he hadn't.

Behind him, the snapping of twigs went almost unnoticed for several seconds.

"Would you look what we've got here."

At the sound of the voice behind him, Will nearly jumped out of his skin and toppled forward into the likely unstable dirt that lined the edge of the quarry's cliff. His arms flew out at his sides, jacket flapping just slightly as he steadied himself before whipping back around in the direction that the voice had come from. Almost in an instant, Will wished that he really had lost his footing and tipped over the edge, diving down into the freezing water hundreds of feet below him. It might have been easier to deal with.

More predictable.

Stepping away from the edge even though the act did nothing to calm his heart as it pounded against his chest, Will stared hard at Troy as the boy descended from the woods a few metres away from him. Their eyes were equally fixed on each other, like a predator and prey waiting for each other's next move. Will could feel his breathing picking up in his throat, his legs braces as he moved back slowly, ready to break into a sprint the very second he needed to. Stepping forward in the same pattern that Will seemed to be moving away, Troy observed Will with wicked amusement.

"You look scared. Any reason for that?" Troy asked slowly, his words hanging in a mock questioning tone as he took a moment to let his eyes dart around the scenery that surrounded him. Like he was trying to prove to Will that he wasn't afraid of needing to run after him should he try to zip away. His carelessness spoke for itself: *Try it. I dare you. Try to get away this time.*

Looking around anxiously towards the darkening forest, Will couldn't see anybody Troy might have drug along with him lingering in the trees nearby. He could never be sure, of course, but for the moment, it seemed to be only the two of them there, facing off like a couple vintage cowboys in an old Western. Except Will didn't have a gun; he had a scarf and a coat and a couple dimes in his pocket, at best. Of course, coins wouldn't do shit.

Before Will could open his mouth to respond, Troy carried on like he hadn't posed a question in the first place.

"Cat got your tongue, Byers? Where are all your *loser* friends? Got tired of sticking up for you?" Troy asked quickly, taking another sharp step forward and letting out a sickening laugh of entertainment

as Will stumbled back a bit, catching himself before he tripped onto his butt but tensing up fast, fingertips shaking as his eyes darted from Troy to the surrounding gravel behind him. His brain was running at a violent speed, thoughts whizzing past as only one objective stuck to the backs of his eyelids like a glowing exit sign: *Run. Go. Run.*

If he could break quick enough and get past Troy, he'd be set. Home free for the time being. Only problem was, Will knew his reflexes weren't quick enough to get past the 10 metres of space between him and Troy before the other boy got onto his antics. There was only one way to go.

"Just leave me *alone*," Will urged as his voice quavered, slamming his lips shut tight as he swallowed hard, watching as Troy blindsided his comment like it hadn't even been spoken aloud.

"Oh man!" Troy spouted suddenly, his face alive with wonder and excitement like a kid in a candy store. He clapped his hands together briefly, making Will flinch as he stepped back once more, and Troy's eyes connected with Will's, his eyes glinting with mischief.

"Where's Frogface? I haven't seen him since he decided to get mouthy with me. Did I bust his nose pretty good? I wonder if I broke it," Troy demanded with determination, teeth flashing as he grinned triumphantly. Something inside Troy's words, the menace that dripped from them, twisted inside the pit of Will's stomach. It took him only a moment to realize, as he noticed his fingernails driving into the palms of his hands, that this feeling was anger.

Stepping forward, Troy's excitement seemed to dribble away. Will could feel the colour draining from his face. *Run*, his brain screamed. *Go. Go. Go. You have to go.*

“Did you ever get to thank him for that, by the way?” Troy prodded as he took another quicker step forward, closing in as Will’s nerves caught flame. Face white as a sheet ghost, Will could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Thank him for what?

“I sure hope you did. Who knows if you’ll get to now?” Troy finished, tugging his hands out of his pockets as he set his sights on Will.

With the knowledge of the area around him, and with the knowledge of how his planned actions had turned out for him in the past, Will Byers did the one thing he felt like he could do in such a situation.

He turned around and ran like hell.

Wind whipped past Will’s exposed sides as his jacket blew out behind him. He was flying through the open area around the edge of the quarry’s raised cliffs, his blood coursing through his veins at a hundred miles a second as he went. He could feel his breath struggling in his throat as gravel flung through the air behind his shoes, threatening to trip him up at any minute. He hadn’t realized how fast he’d been moving until Troy’s shouts echoed angrily behind him. He sounded miles away, his words and their meanings lost to the wind roaring in Will’s ears as he flew by. Something about the distance that seemed to resonate between them made Will slow a bit, less ‘speed’ and more ‘direction’ as his eyes hunted for a clear path through the woods. A misjudgement on Will’s part, of course.

As he took his attention away from the path in front of him, Will felt his shoes collide mid run, bottoms of his feet coming off kilter, sending him off balance and chest first into the gritty dirt beneath him. He could feel the rocks pressing hard into his jean covered knees, leaving mismatched indents in the fragile skin of his palms as he desperately scrambled to gain some traction, get back up and keep running.

As he made an attempt to clamber to his feet, Will was caught off guard by a shrill noise escaping the barrier of the woods to his right. Whipping his head in the direction of the sound, Will almost, *almost* forgot the situation he was in for a moment as he gazed out into the trees, bewildered. Only one thought crossed his mind, even though it truly didn't seem to make any logical sense.

Was that a whistle?

Suddenly, the back collar of his shirt had a hold on it, and Will was yanked to the side, in turn causing him to topple back over and fall flat on his butt. Realization of his current, more pressing problem returned as he saw the irate look on Troy's face, and Will remembered just the situation he had gotten himself into. As Troy reached out and cuffed the collar of Will's shirt, dragging him upwards as Troy knelt down towards him, Will was ready for, or at least acknowledging, the world of pain he was likely about to experience. Instinctively, Will's eyes slammed shut and he cringed.

"You're dead, Byers," Troy hissed at him.

What happened next came as a fast moving blur.

As Will squeezed his eyes shut even tighter than they already were, Troy let out a sharp yelp in reaction to something Will couldn't see and released the boy's shirt collar, letting him flop back onto his butt with a pained squeak. Eyes flying open as he thudded back onto the ground, Will's gaze darted rapidly around the area surrounding him.

Troy had stepped back, startled by something that Will hadn't quite caught wind of. As he took a long look up at the boy, he noticed that Troy seemed to be staring into the woods with a mix of pure fear and confusion stretched across his face. Unable to tear his eyes away from Troy for too long, Will's attention flickered towards the thick, rapidly darkening woods for only a fraction of a second before he settled on Troy once more. It was as if he wasn't even there.

"Who's there?" Troy called in a voice that, Will took quick notice, was shaking rather harshly; the voice of a scared child. Likely what Troy sounded like all the time when he wasn't trying to sound like a big bully. As he stared relentlessly into the trees, Troy flinched hard as though something had struck him somewhere tender, letting out another unimpressed, frightened noise as he reacted to something that Will still couldn't quite see. To his distaste, Troy's eyes burned with anger as he turned his attention back towards Will.

"Byers, if your loser friends are out there *messing* with me..." Troy began in an aggressive hum, but before he could even attempt to finish his sentence, he was struck by the invisible assailants once more, letting out an angered cry as he swatted desperately at the air. Though Will couldn't understand quite what was happening, he knew that if he played his cards right, this might just be his chance. As long as he didn't get struck by whatever was plaguing Troy. Shifting back a bit into the gravel, Will put on the bravest face he could muster.

"My friends aren't out here. It's just me. That's your problem

though,” Will said in a voice that he desperately tried to keep from quaking, digging his palms into the dirt at his sides as he narrowed his eyes. Troy twisted back towards him as he threw his arms up in defense of what was hitting him, his eyes searching Will’s face in attempt to find some sort of signal that he was lying.

“You’re full of shit!” Troy yelled, smacking at another invisible projectile.

“I’m not. You know, you shouldn’t have *messed* with me,” Will continued on, his voice growing steadier as his eyes darted towards the trees, desperately praying that whatever was harming the larger boy in front of him would keep doing just that: sticking to him and straying from Will. He knew he was pressing his luck with every passing second, and at any minute, Troy could detect his lies and in that moment, Will would be done for. For a moment he thought it was hornets, or wasps. *In the winter?*

What do I have to lose, Will wondered.

“You’re going to leave *me*, and my *friends alone*, you understand?” Will pressed shortly as he watched Troy desperately fling his hands towards where he seemed to be getting hit, his eyes growing wide as he whipped around to look at Will. Will kept his face stoic, watching as Troy’s brows furrowed and his eyes lit up with disbelief.

“You really think—“

“*Do you understand!*” Will yelled as his chest grew tighter, his voice growing ever so slightly higher as he attempted to keep his cool.

Some mix of the anxiety about the uncertainty of the situation, and the mix it created with his fear of Troy caught fire inside of Will. As though he'd been stung hard, Troy's lips slammed shut and his eyes widened, staring straight at Will as though the boy had slapped him right across the mouth. He threw a couple more failed swats before he simply shook his head.

"Screw this... fuckin' *psycho*..." Troy whimpered in a passive admission, and as he threw one last slap at whatever seemingly nonexistent piece of ammo, he turned away from Will and took off down the long strip of gravel that looped around the quarry, tearing off into the path that Will had entered from. Exhaling slowly as temporary relief swept over him, Will's celebration was paused as he remembered just what had made Troy take off.

From beside him, a couple metres away, the underbrush that surrounded the trees shifted.

Will could feel his breath hitching in his throat, the air having been practically sucked from his lungs as he turned quickly towards the woods. His brain was soaring, mind racing with pictures of fictional monsters of his own imagination's doing. As the bushes snapped and cracked beneath the pressure of something large rising out of them, Will wondered what it might be like to be eaten by such a monster. He could have been sick right then and there if he hadn't seen what he did only seconds later.

The sheer panic coursing through Will's veins, the overwhelming sense of danger that lurked over his head like a storm cloud, only ceased when three familiar faces breached the thick forest edge, scuffed sneakers trampling through the underbrush that they had previously been hidden inside.

As Will's breathing hitched and choked inside of his throat, he wondered if he'd ever really experienced true relief before like he had then. Staring at the faces of his three best friends, Will's eyes darted down towards their hands as several muddled clicks hit the ground beneath their feet as they stepped onto the gravel. Through the dimming daylight, Will noticed the jagged rocks that they were releasing from their palms, and he understood exactly what had been going on.

"Byers! Thank god! We thought you were dead meat. If we'd gotten here any later--" Dustin exclaimed in a panicked yelp, receiving a sharp smack from Lucas as he raised his voice just a bit higher than the boys were comfortable. Dustin threw a heavy glare towards Lucas, but only briefly before he set his sight back on Will, giving the boy before him a welcoming smile as he dropped the last of his ammo back onto the ground.

"I'm glad you're alright. We, uh..." Dustin laughed slightly to himself, eyes darting towards Lucas as the boy seemed to straighten up, eyeing Will with hidden worry.

"We scared the *shit* out of him," Lucas whisper-yelled with excitement, twisting towards Dustin and giving the boy a cautious look, "and we'll probably be fine. If you don't start yelling again."

Still seated neatly on his butt, Will's eyes flickered back and forth between their faces, taking in the expressions of the two boys as they began to bicker lightly in hushed whispers back and forth so not to alert the likely still nearby Troy. Between them, Will's eyes moved like they were looking through a void, staring down into the off-white sneakers of his childhood best friend as Blue knelt down before him, not a single word escaping his lips at first as he crouched in front of Will. Will's eyes, trained on the boy's laces for a little bit too long, stuck like glue to the ground until his line of sight was

interrupted by a thin, outstretched hand.

He didn't know why he wasn't looking up and greeting the boy before him, but Blue's tender tone broke through the bitter silence between them like a hammer to glass.

"He didn't hurt you too bad, did he?"

Blue's voice was soft, cautious and tame as though he was approaching a wild animal, but it was enough to grab Will's gaze like a magnet. No longer able to avoid the inevitable, Will tore his eyes up from the toes of Blue's shoes as he looked up, meeting the boy's gaze and seeing his face for the first time in nearly two weeks.

Something like a tidal wave coursed through him, a sickening feeling dropping into his stomach and a violent chill coursing its way up his back. He felt like his entire body was turning inside out for a mere moment, just at the sight of Blue kneeling before him, his darkened eyes warm with worry as he searched Will's face for some sort of confirmation that he was alright. Through the dimming light that remained in the sky, Will saw something reflected in Blue's expression that he hadn't really prepared himself for.

As Blue reached out to him and placed two chilled palms against Will's jacketed shoulders, Blue looked like he might collapse with the sheer relief that washed over his face.

Will wondered, in silence, his skin alive and aware of every single change in the atmosphere around him, if Blue was feeling the exact same thing as he was. The silence between them felt mutual. It felt

all-knowing, all seeing. Understanding.

In an odd, all too familiar way, the silence between them reverberated through both their beings, and Will understood exactly what he was feeling.

With Blue, he was something other than the lack of memory. He was the suggestion of remembering, of learning all over again. He was more than a slate to be repeated upon.

With Blue, he was home.

As Will stared up into Blue's face, taking in the features he hadn't seen in what (he realized) had felt like centuries, he noticed the scar.

It was fresh; not in the way that it was a day's old, but just about two weeks. A warm pink sliver against Blue's pale, freckled complexion, it was a stark contrast to the rest of his face as he stared down at Will, still hunting for some sort of explanation. The silence between them was sickening, but the sight that Will couldn't tear his eyes away from was even worse. It was worse, of course, because he understood now. He understood exactly why Troy had been taunting him. He understood the blood, two weeks old but still fresh in his mind. He understood, and it *killed him*.

Raising a hand up, patient, slow, Will reached out and pressed two delicate fingers against the bridge of Blue's nose. In return, Blue grew doe-eyed, and his lips slammed shut in wordless understanding.

"Blue," Will whispered, battling the way his voice seemed to waver,

“what did he say to you?”

Freezing in place like a deer in headlights, Blue’s lips pressed even tighter shut, like he was trying to keep the words trapped inside of his mouth. This all but verbally confirmed Will’s suspicions, and as he swallowed hard, Will spoke up once more, filling the air between them.

“It was about me, wasn’t it?” Will asked, his voice growing more sour towards the situation as he searched for an answer in Blue’s face, only coming back with more questions. As he opened his mouth to demand some sort of response, Blue finally cleared his throat, releasing a gentle cough as he averted his eyes.

Why is he looking away?

“I’m not going to tell you what he said,” Blue replied quietly, his voice level and cool as he looked down towards his fingers, still wrapped carefully around Will’s shoulders.

“I’m not going to, because it doesn’t matter now. He shouldn’t have said anything. He should have kept his mouth shut. But he didn’t. I couldn’t just let him...” pausing, Blue’s eyes met Will’s once more.

“I wasn’t going to let him say that stuff about you. Because I knew it wasn’t true. It was... just static,” Blue murmured, and as he carried on with his simple explanation, he peeled a hand away from Will’s shoulder and reached upwards in a mirroring motion, touching the top of Will’s head as he prodded the scar himself.

"I don't mind a little mark if it'll keep your name out of his mouth. Even temporarily," Blue finished sweetly, a slow smile crossing his lips as his eyes darted from Will's eyes towards the two boys behind him, his expression turning cross as he chided the two of them for arguing so inexcusably loud.

Will's mind was swimming, his hand slipping from Blue's face and drifting back into his lap as Blue turned towards Lucas and Dustin. As he did so, Will could feel his heart sinking into the pit of his stomach, beating as fast as it seemed possible. Words jammed tight into Will's throat as he watched his three friends for a moment, simply taking in their faces and the way they moved, breathed, lived. Suddenly, his voice broke through their almost muted argument.

"I'm glad you guys loved me when you could," Will muttered gently, and it was like a cloak of absolute silence was swept over the four of them. He wasn't sure how he even managed to choke those few words out, but somehow he had, and as his best friends turned and stared at him with questioning eyes, Dustin was the first to speak up.

"...What do you mean, Will?" Dustin whispered, his voice as patient and it was quiet. Will almost didn't hear him at first over the gentle breeze that whizzed by around them, and as he finally found the courage to turn his gaze up once more and meet Blue's eyes, it was like a switch had been flipped on inside of his head. His throat tightened harshly, and Will's hands, which had fallen flat against the tops of his thighs, gripped at the jean material beneath his palms. For comfort, stability, whatever it was: he wasn't getting it.

"I'm glad you were my friends. Because you're all... you're all going to... going to hate.... H... h...." Will began to crumble, slowly but surely, into a teary-eyed mess, his posture growing weak as he felt himself bending forward, tears pooling and dripping down his cheeks

in frigid, damp trails as he felt waves of immeasurable sadness rush over him. Where he hadn't quite given such a reaction to his mother when he'd first gotten the news, he was making up for it then. Unaware that he almost seemed to be coming off kilter, even as he sat on his knees, Will's head dropped forward as he let sobs ripple through him. As he began to tip forward, Will was almost startled right out of his body by the sudden impact of Blue's torso against his, thin but warm sweater-clad arms wrapping around him and pulling him into a tight embrace. Blue's hands were pressed against the centre of Will's back, like he was trying to keep Will steady.

This was the straw that broke the camel's back.

This was the final motion that turned Will Byers to a mess of nothingness.

Squeezing his eyes tightly shut and pressing his forehead into the crook between Blue's shoulder and neck, Will finally let every emotion he had been cooping up inside of him escape. This came out in a multitude of ways: from gentle hiccups as tears dribbled down his cheeks to small whimpers as sob after sob ripped their way out of Will's throat. He didn't seem to be coming to settle, the pain growing to an almost unbearable state inside of his chest, but Lucas spoke up anyways, his voice level though worry seeped into his sentence through his tone.

"Why would you ever think we'd hate you?" Lucas urged, his voice hovering at just the right volume for himself to be heard over the wind. It was starting to get even darker now, the sky above the four boys now growing into a steady Aegean shade of blue. Reaching out and finding Blue's jacket with the tips of his fingers, Will gripped onto the fabric for dear life as though he might slip away if he didn't. Silencing himself as he steadied his response, Will felt the air around

the four of them grow stone cold, and he knew he was as ready as he was ever going to be. Fingers wrapping tightly around Blue's sides like the boy might be torn away from him at any second, words slipped from Will's lips like a cancer.

"I'm not going to remember. They told me I'll probably *never* remember. Anything at all," Will whispered through his sorrowful haze, and around him, while he hadn't thought it possible, the air grew colder. Though there was a brief pause between his words where Will could feel the reactions of his friends taking place, he wasn't finished.

"I... I.... I'm going to be like this forever, and I can't even *do* anything about it! I know how *bad* it is and I'm just... scared... I'm so *scared*, you know? Because I *know* you want me to remember. I *know* you do, *and* I do too, but... but..." Will rambled on quickly, words tearing from his lips like he couldn't get them out fast enough. From his spot with his chin positioned on Will's shoulder, Blue's grip on the boy tightened just slightly.

"Will—" Blue began in a sharp whisper, but he was cut off before he could continue.

Panic was setting in.

"Why is this happening to me? What did I do? I don't get it, I have to remember. I *have* to. I can't *lose* you guys, too. I *can't* lose anyone else," Will continued, a second round of tears beginning to form as Will clutched the boy in front of him, going more slack as the seconds passed, weariness working its way into his veins.

“*Will*,” Blue repeated, his voice growing more sure.

“I’ve lost myself already,” Will whispered, voice trembling, “and I can’t lose *you* too.”

Whether he had intended it or not, the both of them were well aware that Will was no longer talking to the group as a whole.

Gripping onto Will’s shoulders, Blue pulled back just enough so that he could look into the boy’s face, a flash of shock and mourning crossing his face as he saw Will’s tear stained cheeks. Will found himself looking anywhere, at anything but the boy in front of him.

“Will,” Blue began, his thumbs pressing a bit more into Will’s shoulders as he spoke, “nobody is going *anywhere*.”

In that moment, Will might have sworn his heart had stopped for several seconds.

Staring into Will’s face, Blue shook his head every so slightly, his grip never loosening on the boy.

“Listen to me,” he whispered, not budging as he heard the two boys behind him move in to crouch next to Will and give him a show of comfort.

“We’re not going to leave you, Will. We were *never* going to. The *hell* kind of party would we be if we didn’t have our cleric?” Blue urged

in a tender voice, eyes endlessly searching Will's face as the boy finally peeled his eyes away from the treeline and met Blue's gaze. Will would tell by the way his eyes were glistening, tears threatening to spill from his eyes at moment, that Blue was being sincere with him, and this made his heart clench tightly in his chest, unrelenting. Will's mind was racing, dipping in and out of thoughts while one particular thought catches directly on the forefront of his consciousness. He tried to wash it away, but he knew, oh he knew, it's been there for weeks. It simply needed to be drawn out. He simply needed to stop ignoring it.

I love you.

Before he could respond, Blue continued.

"You know what? Yeah. It *hurts*, okay? You know that better than *any of us* do," Blue spoke honestly, his words heavy as his grip began to ease on Will. In response, Will leaned into Blue, resting his forehead once more against the boy's shoulder as he felt the last of his tears spill out onto the thighs of Blue's jeans.

I love you, Will's mind echoed. *I do. I really do, don't I? That's what this is.*

"It hurts, but it won't always. You're *still* Will," Blue whispered finally, closing his point as he wrapped his arms around the smaller boy in front of him, letting his eyes fall closed in a mirroring act as he felt Lucas and Dustin embrace the two of them in return, whispering gentle agreements as the four of them held on tight to each other. Through the darkness behind Will Byers' closed lids, he could almost see the solace washing over him like a massive tsunami.

“You’re still our best friend,” Blue whispered once more, and Will knew this time that Blue was speaking for himself specifically. Fingertips pressing gently into the small of Will’s back as Blue rested his head against Will’s shoulder, Will could feel his body sinking into the embrace like he was the final piece in a massive puzzle. The feeling, *that feeling*, was warm, creeping up into his throat as his thoughts sung.

I love you. I don’t know your name but I know you. I’ve never loved anyone before, yet somehow, I know this is it. I know it is. I love you more than I think anybody can love another person.

I love you, Blue.

I love you.

“*I’d never leave you,*” Blue uttered quietly, and for that one blissful moment, as the four of them sat huddled in the gravel lining of the quarry’s elevated walls, Will was exactly who he needed to be in the arms of the people he loved.

Notes for the Chapter:

The angst demon has been defeated.

12. hideaway

Notes for the Chapter:

First of all: Happy Birthday, Will Byers! They grow up so fast.

Secondly: this is the second last chapter. whew. wow. jeepers. jinkies. I'm going to write an epilogue after, but technically? The main story ends in 8 days. I'm gonna miss this, but I'm excited to start my next fic and share it with you!

Without further ado, here it is.

“So what started this... whole *thing*?”

With his back pressed against the hard brick finish of Hawkins Junior High's right wing building, Will Byers tucked his chilled fingers into hand openings of his sweater, trying to conserve as much heat as he could as he stared out across the school's parking lot. As the weeks progressed, Indiana was proving it's winters to be more and more hostile as the temperature average decreased and bundling up with multiple layers of socks and coats became the norm.

To Will's left, Dustin sat against the small jutting out piece of brick wall that rested against the structure just high enough to provide a seat for the four boys in comparison to the frigid concrete beneath their dangling feet. His hands were stuffed into his pockets tightly, trying to keep his hands from growing cold as his gaze followed Wills.

“The name, I mean. It was... it's because he's cranky, right? Like he's 'blue'?” Dustin had offered in response to Lucas' questioning, glancing towards Will as he tipped his head, waiting for some sort of

confirmation from his guess.

To Will's right sat Lucas and Blue, in that order. Lucas, the owner of the voice that had posed the initial question, was tucked well into a puffy green jacket that he'd owned for several years but hadn't quite grown out of yet. Wrapped snugly around his neck was a pitch black scarf, and his hands, which were mirroring Dustin's on the insides of his pockets, were gloved and toasty. Blue sat peacefully on the other side of him, nestled inside of his plaid jacket like he couldn't have been happier anywhere else in the world. His bare hands, pale, thin and shaking (not entirely credited to the winter cold) were resting on the brick makeshift seat they were all seated on, fingers gripping the frozen structure as he leaned forward just enough to see Will from around Lucas' shoulder.

"It's not because he's cranky, Dustin," Lucas grumbled softly, in no way cranky himself as he peered between Will and Dustin, his eyes settling on Will finally as he awaited a response. Watching the kids dribble out of the school and head towards the idling cars that were parked along the drive in through the school's main parking lot, Will savoured the question for several seconds before his gaze flickered towards Blue. As their eyes met, and Blue gave Will a soft, patient smile, Will felt his throat tighten.

He needs a haircut, Will thought almost immediately, and his face, though already flushed from the cold, darkened even more at the fact that this was the first thing that came to his mind.

As the first couple weeks of December had slipped by gracefully, everything got progressively more blue. Both in a general sense, and in Will's case, quite literally. The school was now completely papered with decorations for the coming evening, which had crept up on the students and faculty like a quick-moving infection. Students had their

outfits all picked out, and in only a couple hours after their departure, students would be returning to the school in glittery dressed and nice dress shirts to spent their evening dancing and having fun. It had been getting more Blue for Will, of course, as one could expect. After their confrontation at the quarry, everything seemed to settle back into place. Will was drifting off after long school days to spend his evenings in Blue's basement with the three of them again, and there had even been several nights (on weekends, of course) that he'd found himself too tired to make his way home. These nights he crashed on the couch downstairs, enveloped in the welcoming scent of Blue's home, whispering nothings back and forth with Blue until the two of them drifted into a serene sleep. This was doing nothing, of course, to help Will's prior situation. He thought, however, that if he couldn't approach it now, he could wait. He liked spending time with Blue more than anything else, whether Blue was aware of that himself or not. Even if they weren't really doing anything. Just being there felt nice. It felt *right*.

Will imagined, as he dwelled on Lucas' question in the back of his brain, that the Snow Ball would be a nice time. He wondered what kind of music they were going to play. He wondered, secretively, if there would be any boys dancing with boys at the dance, even if he knew how unlikely that was. He hoped they would play good music. Good like Jonathan's stuff. Good like The Clash. He wouldn't get to know, of course.

He wasn't going.

"You really want to know?" Will murmured with amusement trickling over his words, his eyes tearing away from Blue as he gave Lucas and Dustin separate, testing looks.

"Of course we want to know!" Dustin urged, leaning forward towards

Will as he eyed the boy suspiciously. Though Will attempted to keep a straight face as he turned his eyes forward again, watching a couple cars whiz in and out of the lot, he couldn't keep a smile from cracking across his lips.

"His *shirt*," Will admitted slowly, entertained by the sudden silence that followed.

"Wha— his *shirt*?" Lucas began, twisting back around to observe Blue as Will spoke. From the corner of Will's eyes, he could see Blue's smile blossom into a full blown, amused grin.

"You're getting something that I'm not," Dustin murmured, watching the three of his friends in blind confusion.

"The first time I met him after I came home, he was wearing a blue shirt," Will mumbled shyly, avoiding his friends bewildered looks as he turned his head down. He understood then just how silly his explanation was, how he easily could have picked something else. How he easily could have *asked* somebody else, a teacher, anybody. He understood then how foolish it was to have this name for Blue.

Yet, he still clung to it.

With the news about his hellish brain still fresh in his mind like it had only happened minutes before, Will still stuck to the nickname like a bad habit. He still didn't ask, and neither of them seemed to have the gall to talk about it face to face. He wondered how long they could keep it up before one of them couldn't stand it anymore. Will wondered, in the brief silence between the four of them, if he

even *wanted* to know Blue's real name.

Did it matter?

"That's... listen, I get it, but that's *lame*. You comin', Lucas?" Dustin chided after their moment of quiet, his eyes darting across the parking lot as he took notice of a dark brown car veering into the parking lot. From inside, as Will's eyes followed Dustin's gaze, he could see who he imagined was Dustin's mother in the driver's seat; blonde, colourful and grinning like the happiest woman on earth as she pulled into a spot only half a dozen metres away from the boys. Dustin, climbing to his feet with a small groan of displeasure, glanced towards the three boys and gave each of them a salute. Following his lead was Lucas, easing himself up from his spot on the ground and brushing off the backs of his calves.

"It's not *that* lame," Blue spoke up suddenly, capturing Will's attention, and the lilt in his voice did Blue no good to protect him from the gentle slug Will gave him to the upper arm. Letting out a sharp laugh and reaching up to cup the spot where Will had hit him, Blue turned his attention back towards Dustin.

"It's pretty lame. Listen, I'll see you tonight, right? And you better be looking *fresh* because I have an appearance to uphold," Dustin teased lightly, receiving a well deserved middle finger salute from Blue as he and Lucas began their short trek across the lot towards the car. Sparing a gentle 'see ya' as he followed Dustin, Lucas twisted back towards them momentarily as he wrapped his fingers around the car door handle.

"You know, it's only *lame* because you guys are *still* playing along!" Lucas called back to them, a sly, knowing smile crossing his lips as he

spared a brief wave. Opening the car door and climbing into the back seat, Lucas shut the door with a soft thud, and the car twisted and peeled out of the parking lot once again. Will had grown still in an instant.

You suck, Sinclair, Will thought to himself, flustered. *You suck.*

Will could feel a hot blush creeping up towards the tips of his ears at Lucas' comment, and as he watched Dustin's car disappear down the drive, Will became violently aware of the fact that Lucas left the two of them alone with this comment hanging over their heads. The air grew thick around them, swelling with a tension that Will desperately wished he could escape from.

Couldn't they just not talk about it? Couldn't they just ignore it? *Hell*, Will thought, *I've been ignoring my feelings, so why can't I ignore this conversation just like that? Where is my mom? Can she come get me? I don't want to have to talk about this, for the love of god, just say something and change the subject, we don't need to—*

"I can tell you, if you want."

Freezing where he sat, nerves shot, Will turned his head downwards where he should have instead given Blue the courtesy of looking at him when he spoke. Staring down into his lap as his chilled breath pooled and drifted from his lips, wafting upwards into the mid-December air, Will felt like he might sink right through the asphalt.

“Tell me what?” Will asked quietly, though the both of them knew full well *what*.

Taking a moment to let Will’s obvious bluff sink in, Blue shifted in a bit closer to him, closing the excess space that Lucas had left behind.

“My *name*, Will,” Blue hummed softly, speaking as though he could sense their mutual understanding. He wrapped his arms around his knees for a moment, resting his chin against his knee like tucking himself in tight might conserve his heat. Will, refraining from turning towards Blue and assessing his face, wanting to see if he really truly meant it.

He yearned to say yes, of course. To cut the line between what was solid and what was fictional and finally blur the difference between what he knew and what he had forgotten. In a way Will wondered if that was exactly what he needed; somewhere to begin, to be given information that he’d been desperately wrecking his brain for over more than a month. Will wanted to say yes, of course, because he knew that he deserved it at that point. He’d been given his final assessment; he’d been given that heavy bearing to hold for quite possibly the rest of his life. If anything, now was the time to be given what he worked for.

So why did he hesitate?

“No,” Will responded finally, wringing his chilled fingers as he spoke, his voice a nearly muted mumble as he stared at his breath billowing up and away from his mouth. His throat was tight, heart dropping into his stomach as his gaze twisted slightly towards Blue.

“No?” Blue questioned, the surprise in his voice making up for Will’s lack thereof.

Will shook his head, heart racing.

“No,” he repeated, his fingers itching for something to do as he spoke, “I don’t want you to tell me. You wanted me to figure it out, right? To remember it?”

Only silence resonated from Blue, heavy like a cloud overtop of his head as he sat, tapping his fingertips against the knee of his jeans. He had drawn back a bit, watching Will from the corner of his eye as though he was too afraid to look at him head on. Neither of them would do each other the service of making eye contact. Neither of them would move, it seemed.

“Don’t you want that?” Will whispered, lower now, directed to and only to Blue in that moment. As he finally turned his head and observed Blue’s face, his heavy lidded eyes and his flushed, freckled cheeks, Will watched as Blue shifted.

Without saying a word, not even sparing a nod or even acknowledging Will’s second response, Blue peeled his fingers off of his knee and reached out to Will, scooping his hand up into his without even taking a look around to see who might have been watching.

Where Will had been subtly chilled before, he was warm with a violent blush in seconds.

His instinct, as much as he absolutely hated it, was to yank his hand away. To pull his fingers out of Blue's grip and to look around to make sure that nobody had caught wind of what had just happened. His first instinct was to hide, to shy away from the reactions they might get. It wasn't until Blue's warm fingers intertwined with his, giving Will's hand a gently affirming squeeze as their joined hands fell between them, hanging peacefully, that Will looked at Blue. Truly looked at him.

There was something about the boy's face that made Will's stomach ache with jealousy. The way he didn't even look up when he had taken Will's hand; the way he didn't care about what anybody around them might have to say. A twinge of guilt rippled through him for feeling a bit better with their hands tucked secretly together at their sides, frozen fingers folded together inside of their jacket arms. Will savoured the slight callous of the boy's hands for several moments before he finally decided to speak, watching as Blue's eyelashes fluttered while he looked down into the asphalt beneath his feet.

"You're not scared of anything, are you?" Will questioned, relaxing for a moment as he leaned a bit further back into the wall behind them. His statement, as meager as it felt, sparked the smallest of smiles on Blue's lips, and Will felt, for a brief moment, on top of the world. Taking in the question, Blue's face flashed with something that Will couldn't quite process before he finally replied.

"I get scared of things, Will," Blue responded honestly, his voice a sleek whisper against the distant hum of students chatting. Neither of them bothered to look up. Will wondered, for a moment, if there was any need to at that point. If there was one thing that he didn't feel ashamed of, it was Blue. As he observed the boy next to him, Blue turned slightly, eyes fixed on Will's face.

“I get scared, sure, but not about this” Blue hummed quietly, tapping his thumb against the side of Will’s hand as context to his comment. Mirroring Will, Blue leaned back into the brick wall behind him.

“I’m not scared,” he spoke, gaze softening by the second, “are you?”

For some reason, Will’s words caught in his throat like he was automatically shut down in an attempt to lie. He wanted to say no, to just deny it completely and act as strong as Blue seemed to be, but it wasn’t true. He couldn’t bluff and say he wasn’t afraid, because there really hadn’t been many moments in the previous month where he hadn’t been just that, omitting times when he was sleeping. He’d spent plenty of time being scared, of this, of other things. There was one thing that he kept swimming back to, though. Glancing down towards their hands, Will brushed his thumb against the top of Blue’s.

“Yeah, I’m scared,” Will began, his words threatening to catch once more. Shaking his head ever so slightly, Will kept his eyes down as Blue twisted a bit to look at him better. *Honest*, Will thought. *Honest is better than nothing*.

“I’m afraid most of the time lately,” Will admitted, squeezing Blue’s hand, “but not around you.”

Though Will wasn’t looking directly at Blue, he didn’t need to be to catch the subtle shift in the boy’s position. He knew Blue was smiling without even having to look up. The silence between them was heavy and well saturated, extending over several minutes as the two of them waited for their separate drives in tired silence, their hands never parting. It was only minutes before Nancy was to pull up into

the drive, however, that Blue shattered the silence between them.

“You know what I miss?” Blue whispered, catching Will’s attention. In return, Will repeated his former action, thumb running smoothly over the skin of Blue’s hand.

“What do you miss?” Will sighed peacefully.

Letting his head drift to the side, Blue observed Will for a moment before speaking again.

“Castle Byers,” Blue admitted, and the words almost flew right over Will’s head. Pausing for an extended amount of time, Will’s head lolled to the side in a mimicked act, though as he met Blue’s sleepy gaze, Will almost wanted to yank his head forward again in an effort to curb his blush.

“Castle Byers?” he repeated, slowly, and Blue took notice of the way the words seemed to roll off of his tongue like a foreign language. He took notice, of course, almost immediately.

“Yeah, you know, the...” Blue paused, eyes searching Will’s face for several seconds for some sort of recognition before he really understood what was going on.

“You don’t remember it,” Blue mumbled, more of a statement than a question, but Will nodded anyways in confirmation, feeling suddenly bad about this specific missing piece. Will recognized the look on

Blue's face, and yet he still couldn't find it in him to spare himself and look away. A wash of nostalgia, first, and then a brief splash of sadness tainted Blue's expression, but only for a second before he seemed to force it out, leveling with himself.

"Sorry," Will whispered.

"It's... no, it's fine. I'm surprised you haven't seen it. That big ol' fort in the woods behind your place. We used to go out there sometimes, in the summer. Just sit out there and listen to the birds... play board games, and stuff..." Blue mumbled, subconsciously giving Will's hand a tender squeeze of acknowledgement as he turned his head away, the first to break the connection between them as he raised his head, gaze aimed towards the sky.

"It's nothing, it's stupid, I just..." Blue trailed off, and as his fingers began to loosen around Will's, Will almost clenched harder on Blue's hand just to keep him for a little bit longer. Instead of drawing away fully, however, Blue simply flexed his fingers and pressed them flat against Will's, playing with his hand as though this was something casual. He was sure making it out to be. His words echoed inside Will like he was simply hollow.

It's not stupid, Will wanted to rush, to urge him. *It's not stupid.*

God, you know I miss it too.

Before Will could open his mouth to deny Blue's statement, the familiar sight of a wood panelled station wagon teetered carefully into the side lot that the boys were sitting in. In a flash, Blue's warm palm had disappeared from Will's, before the boy could have even reached out to grab it. It was then, of course, that Will understood

just how similar their situations were. Not the same, of course, but viciously similar.

Everyone knows and I'm still scared, Will thinks to himself, pained, and nobody knows about you, but you couldn't care less. Until it comes to them.

It always comes back to them, doesn't it?

From the inside of the station wagon, Nancy sat passively, right hand resting on the top of the wheel as she pulled up a few metres away from the two boys. As Will tucked his hand back into his lap, drawing his legs up closer to his chest, Blue rose from his spot on the ground and looped his fingers around the handle of his backpack.

“You have fun tonight” Will muttered softly, meaning it but yet, at the same time, wishing he could take it back immediately. Blue caught it, of course. *Nothing slips past him*, Will thought.

“Will—“ Blue began.

“Castle Byers, huh?” Will continued, speaking about anything but the dance now to keep Blue from saying what Will worried he might. To try and convince him to come. As if he needed convincing to come and let all of his hopes fall through the floor. As if he couldn't just survive on the dreams he'd yearned for.

He couldn't, of course.

Pausing until Nancy placed a gentle bump on the horn, Blue threw an impatient hand up towards her as he turned back to look down at Will.

“You go check that out, yeah?” Blue urged, some sort of need reflecting in his voice that caught Will’s attention right away. There was an earnestness about it, something deeper than the surface of his words would allow. As Will’s brows furrowed and the two boys’ gazes met once more, the Byers’ family car pulled easily into the parking lot next to Nancy. Will couldn’t find the urge to move for several seconds before Blue spoke one last time, turning away and approaching the car as he wrapped his fingers around the door handle.

“You never know. Maybe I’m in there somewhere” Blue offered, a patient, subtly sad smile flashing across his face before he climbed into Nancy’s car.

Though his mother was a patient woman, Will didn’t even budge until Blue had been whisked all the way out of his sight. Even then, as Will finally rose to his feet and grabbed the strap of his bag, making his way to the car, Blue’s words echoed inside his brain for the entire ride home.

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To his relief, reflecting on the misfortune of his recent experiences in the woods, Castle Byers wasn’t hard to spot from the edge of the woods behind the Byers’ house.

Will had climbed out of his mother’s car almost the exact moment it had stopped, abandoning his backpack on the porch as he rounded

the house towards the back. Before his mother had an opportunity to question him about where he was going, Will had twisted a bit and called back to her, no confusion or hesitance in his tone.

“I’m going to Castle Byers!” he had shouted back towards the car as his mother had climbed out and peered over the top of the hood towards him, an intrigued and only subtly worried look on her face as she watched him go. Will imagined that some part of her understood that this was something that needed to happen, because without question or argue, Joyce had shut the car door behind her and called out a motherly ‘be careful!’ in his direction as he went.

Will’s eyes were drawn to it immediately; only a few yards away, peeking through the trees and leaning slightly in Will’s direction like it was beckoning for him to come take a look inside. Will stepped through into the woods almost against his own decision, like a magnet was pulling him towards the lonely structure.

Ancient hemlock trees stretched up around him for what seemed like miles, putting into perspective for Will just how tiny he really was as he slowly made his way through the remnants of the past summer’s dead underbrush. Will could smell the fallen pine needles as they crunched beneath his feet, inhaling deeply as he tried to steel his nerves. He didn’t quite know why he was afraid, or what he ought to be afraid of. He wasn’t worried that a family of raccoons had maybe taken shelter inside of it, or even squirrels. Animals posed to worry to him.

In a way, he grew to understand with each tentative step that he took, that he was more afraid of what he had *left* in there. What the boy he used to be had been keeping cooped up inside his little hideaway. A part of him understood, as he breached the 20 foot gap between him and the tiny hut, that if he was going to remember

anything at all, this felt like it would be the place to project him towards remembrance. Watching his footing as he rounded the back of it, Will kept a sharp eye on the ground beneath him as he stepped over a melting clump of snow, peering upwards and finally getting a good, long look at the front of Castle Byers.

The part of him, whatever part it was that still knew this place, no matter how hard it had been knocked around and buried deep in his brain during his accident, seized Will's heart then.

It wasn't too shabby, for something that a young boy had made. In fact, if Will was being even more honest with himself, it looked quite good. Beneath a large, protective blue tarp, thin logs of cool brown wood made up its exterior, pointed towards the sky like beacons in not quite straight rows that formed its walls. Hardly even having to think about it, Will reached out and brushed his finger tips against the rough piece of plywood that created the Castle's welcome sign. Its edges were jagged, but its text was more than welcoming. Licking his lips as his face was whipped with cool air, Will stared up at the multitude of signs over the entrance with a heavy sadness resting on his shoulders.

Castle Byers.

Home of Will the Wise.

All friends welcome.

"All friends welcome" Will repeated softly, a slim smile painted across his lips as he raised his arm even higher, brushing a finger over the chipped yellow paint that formed each letter. He wondered how small he must have been when Castle Byers was created in comparison to his age then, thinking about how he must have had to

get Jonathan to fix the sign just above the doorway. *All friends welcome.* He pondered this, glancing down into the thin piece of damp, red-striped fabric for several seconds before his thoughts ran back towards that afternoon. Towards Blue's fingers, tangled with his own in the safety of their coat sleeves. The boy's voice rang clear in Will's head, like it had happened only moments before.

I'm not scared. Are you?

Will's cheeks lit up in response, and he twisted around, his gaze darting between the trees as though he expected someone to be watching him all the way out there. Green eyes glimmering with a surge of distrust, Will turned back towards Castle Byers and braced a hand once more on the rim of the entryway before he reached out and took hold of the red and white curtain shielding him from its contents.

If anything's going to help me, Will thought once more, it's got to be this.

Taking a slow, well needed inhale, Will peeled back the curtain and crouched down, peering into Castle Byers. Almost immediately, he was taken aback. Not by the vast amount of significant objects inside of the place, though. Rather, it was the opposite.

He hadn't known quite what to expect, but it wasn't what he was looking at. It seemed like if there had been anything entirely significant there, Old Will had taken that well into account just in time for the winter frost to start creeping in. Strips of tape and clear push pins dotted the thick log walls like poorly replicated constellations, and as Will's eyes roamed these walls, scanning and cataloguing every single thing in search of something meaningful, his eyes finally landed on the box.

The floor of Castle Byers, where Will assumed a blanket of some sort was once housed, laid a twin tarp like the one that adorned the roof, only this one seemed to be much more *used*. There were several large rips in the material that Will likely could have slid through himself if he tried, and as he had stepped into the fort itself fully to get a better look, the subtle glimmer of tin had caught his attention immediately. Will was suddenly no longer worried about what had been strung up on the walls long before, especially if he had no way to find out what it was.

The only solid object left behind in the fort besides a small mug and a set of half empty paints, Will made a good solid guess as to what was in the tin as he knelt down, ignoring the dirt that stuck to the knees of his jeans as he pulled the tin out from half-under the tarp.

Taking a slow inhale, Will wrapped his fingers around the edge of the container and pried it open with an easy *pop*.

He'd thought he'd gotten all of them, that second week of school when he'd found all his old art supplies. He realized, pretty clearly, that he'd kept the best ones separate. The special ones.

Drawings. At least a dozen, or more, filled the rectangular tin.

Plopping down onto the tarp on his butt, Will crossed his legs in front of him as he brought the container up onto his lap, easing the layers of drawings out of the tin as he began to leaf through them.

Plenty of them were straight forward: drawings of what appeared to

be Lucas shooting at a massive green and red dragon, or drawings of Dustin shooting slingshot ammo at what appeared to be a crude, inaccurate drawing of Troy and a couple of his goons. A slow, nostalgic smile crept across Will's lips, and he traced a finger tip over the drawings lightly, quite glad deep down that they hadn't been damaged by any snow that might have snuck in past the tarp on the roof. As Will kept flipping through, the drawings got more magical, better, even. Like the progression of time was visible in his work. As Will skimmed through the drawings, content in just looking and understanding that these things, once, had been a part of him, he flipped to the second last piece of paper and stopped.

His fingers hovered over the drawing, and for a moment, Will was glad that he had never picked up the childish habit of needing to add the names of the people he drew overtop of their figures. It wasn't like he really needed it, particularly for that one, however. It was obvious what he was looking at.

As Will's fingertips danced across the page, tracing the coloured pencil lines that made up Blue's thin frame, dressed in a rather dapper outfit in Will's sketch, he understood what exactly he was looking at. His fingers traced the lines of Blue's figure before darting an inch over to what appeared to be a drawing of himself, dressed just as primly as the former. In big, daunting blue letters, in what appeared to be Will's attempt at cursive writing, were three words that had been haunting Will for weeks.

The Snow Ball.

As though this was some sort of a sign, the flick of an internal switch, even, Will flattened the drawings back into the tin and tucked it under his arm. He'd seen what he needed to. He knew what he needed to do.

As Will sprung to his feet and shoved the entrance curtain out of his way, stepping around to the side of Castle Byers and setting his eyes on the visible corner of his house from where he stood below, Will began to run.

Tin clutched tightly under his arm, Will didn't stop running into he found himself back at the top of the hill, breathless as he held onto the container in his arms for dear life. He knew what he needed to do now. He knew what he had been planning to do the entire time. Before the accident, before everything had been stripped away from him.

It was time, if there ever was going to be one.

Gliding through the grass towards the front porch, Will's mind thundered, thoughts flying. He didn't even know if he had anything more dapper than a t-shirt in his closet, but he was going. He didn't even know if he had the spare change to get in, but he would find it.

He was going to the Snow Ball if it was the last thing he did, because it was time.

Because I love you didn't mean anything if you were the only one to hear it.

13. seven

Notes for the Chapter:

here it is. the last chapter.

first, a few words though, 'cause y'all know how soft i am.

the last chapter. well, the last chapter of the main story. there's /14 for a reason, fellas.

but in all seriousness: thank you. from literally the bottom of my heart. writing is incredibly hard for me and not a piece gets released of mine without me fretting about it, but the overwhelming support for this fic has been mind boggling, and the friends i have made in the process i will forever be grateful for. so here goes.

a month ago, there was a groupchat created to talk about wimm and show support for it, which, i don't know, i'll still never wrap my head around. today is our one month since creation, one month since i met some of my best friends, and in turn, here is the final chapter. because of my writing, i've met some of the most amazing people in the world. thank you, so dearly. this is for you.

this chapter, my favourite chapter, is dedicated to erin, ellen, maud, soph, laura, grace, gamze, liz, kaya, rubie, paulina and sara. i love you all very much.

TLDR: i'm emo over my progress and i love my friends. here's 'seven'.

Will was astonished, as the Byers' family car drifted into the half empty school parking lot, by the rather well numbered turnout of students. He had imagined that it was going to be busy, sure, it was a

school dance after all. There was seldom a time when school was anything but work, work and more work. So of course Will knew there would be people there. He just hadn't really expected what felt like the whole *school* to be there.

From outside the gym, Will could see just enough of the interior through the first set of open double doors that his heart began to pound in his chest. The lights streamed outwards and illuminated a tiny fraction of the ground in front of the entrance like a welcoming beacon, and Will instinctually reached upwards, thin fingers clutching at the front of his blazer. He'd been glad, and yet simultaneously begrudged, that he hadn't really grown much since the last time he'd attended the Snow Ball.

His mother had, with only brief intervals of motherly questioning, helped him dig through into the back of his closet to pick out a nice dress shirt and the dark green blazer he'd ended up wearing to the dance. Dress pants weren't hard, and he didn't have much choice around the single pair that he owned. Overall, though he couldn't help but stifle the nervous, self conscious feeling in his stomach, Will felt like he had cleaned up pretty nice.

Yet now, he felt afraid. As he stared numbly towards the doors, Will felt a warm hand on his left forearm.

"You alright, honey?"

Peeling his eyes away from the sight of the school, Will glanced over towards his mother, assessing the compassionate look on her face. He knew she'd been confused when he had suddenly rushed back into the house and told her, on a whim, that he *needed* to go to the dance because, well, *he just needed to*. She'd been lenient with him then, of

course, but didn't he owe her some sort of explanation, at least? He owed her that. He just didn't know if he could give that to her.

"Yeah, I'm alright."

"Is your special someone here?" Joyce asked in a way that only mothers can, and Will felt the tips of his ears growing flush in embarrassment.

"W-What do you me—"

"Jonathan told me," Joyce assured her son, giving his arm a soft pat as she drew her hand back, a curious smile crossing her face as she watched her boy. Will felt his nerves growing taut, and though he knew and Joyce knew well of his stance on these sort of things, he still felt like he was coming clean in admitting it.

"So? Is he?" Joyce poked, her voice patient as she eyed him.

He, Will thought.

"Yeah," Will whispered, eyes dropping towards the passenger's seat floor, "he is."

He, Will thought. That feels good. He. 'He' isn't pretending. He. A boy. The boy.

“You’ll be fine, sweetheart, I know it,” Joyce cooed as she glanced past Will and towards the bright light gleaming through the front school doors. Will stared down into his hands quietly for a moment, swallowing back whatever had been preventing him from getting out of the car, then turned back to look at his mother.

“Thanks, Mom,” Will whispered slowly, and he didn’t need to clarify just *what* he was thankful for. There wasn’t much that he *wasn’t* thankful for.

Giving Will one last nod of encouragement, Joyce beamed at her youngest pride and joy.

“You go get ‘em, kiddo,” she said softly, and as Will climbed out of the car, she wondered if she could ever be any prouder of her son than she felt in that moment.

Shutting the door behind him, Will took in the winter chill like it was an old friend, stuffing his fingers into his pockets and letting his fingertips brush against his entry free made of silver coin as he walked up the drive. He could feel his heart rate picking up, and at the sound of the car pulling back out of the drive and pattering away out of the lot, Will knew that he had just made his decision final. He was there, of course, so it always had been. He knew he couldn’t leave without doing what he needed to do.

Something about being in the car made it feel like he’d had a choice at some point. He knew very well, though, that he did not. He never did.

Making his way up towards the front doors, Will could already hear the music, feel it in soft vibrations as he grabbed a hold of the front door's bar handle and pushed. He was going through his calming down routine, however futile it came to be. He was counting to 10 and back, breathing in and out on each number, seconds between them. If he focused on something, panic might not set in, he was thinking. Panic was already there, of course. He'd been panicking since he pulled on his clothes.

Stepping into the school, Will gazed down the hallway as his eyes settled on a small table that had been set up before the hallway towards the auditorium. Streamers were strung neatly from the ceiling, a pale blue that made Will feel warm inside, and on the opposite side of the hall from the table was another, much longer table. This one didn't seem to have a meaning besides being a blockade, however. Glancing back towards the first table, Will eyed the large Bristol board sign taped to the front of the table that read, in messy cursive, *Admissions Here!*, and behind the table in an aged wooden chair sat a friendly looking young woman, someone Will didn't really recognize.

They might even be someone's parent, Will thought briefly as he moved towards the table. He couldn't imagine why any adults would want to spend their evening here. It wasn't all that, he'd thought. He wasn't fully aware of how much he was talking it down.

Digging his money out of his pocket, Will watched as the woman straightened up in her seat.

"Good evening, just one?" the lady asked patiently, eyes dropping down to his palm as he outstretched his hand, offering the money to her.

“Yes, please,” Will spoke quietly, placing the money into her palm as she took it from him. Will watched in silence as she dropped the coins into a small tin with a *clink* as they rattled against everyone else’s change, reaching across the table to the tiny ink pad as she massaged the rubber of a stamp into it’s surface. Glancing upwards at Will, they exchanged polite smiles.

“Let me see your hand, sweetheart,” the woman said, beckoning him forward as he tentatively placed his hand flat down on the table. The woman pressed the hand stamp gently against the top of his hand, and as she removed it, Will stared down at the icy blue snowflake that now adorned the pale surface of his skin.

Bringing his hand back from the table, Will observed the design with quiet curiosity.

“You have fun,” the lady said finally, giving Will a small nod as he met her gaze one last time and rounded the table towards the gymnasium. His head was thudding slightly now, and he prayed that this wasn’t the coming sign of a headache. *I don’t need a headache right now*, Will had thought, unimpressed, right hand rubbing the wrist of his left as he studied the stamp. *I need plenty of things but that isn’t one of them*.

As Will reached the doors to the auditorium, he found himself stopping. He stared into the wooden finish of the double doors in front of him, trying to shake that nervous sensation out of himself to no avail. He had a right to be nervous. Out of all the times he had been nervous in the past month and a half, this one time had the most credit.

1. 9. 8. 7. 6.

Will breathed in and out, listening to the hum of music behind the doors. As he reached out and placed a hand against the door, he could feel the sound waves pulsing through it's surface.

1. 4. 3. 2.

2.

2.

1.

Taking a long, much needed deep breath, Will took his first step forward and, pushing open the doors, drifted into the gymnasium.

It was beautiful, to say the absolute least.

Through the decorative lights fixed around the edge of the ceiling, strands and slivers of silver streamers glittered and shone as they hung from strings tracing the roof above the dance floor. Every time they shifted, light was reflected across their mirror-like surface, shining down on the students below as they shuffled, chatted and danced in the centre of the auditorium. Balloons of every shade of blue were strung up along the bleachers, tied to weights seated at the drink booth where a large bowl of crimson red punch was situated. There was a photo booth with tacky blue backgrounds to his left, and if Will looked straight forward, he might have been overwhelmed by the amount of kids hustling and bustling around each other. He wasn't overly worried at that very moment about the crowd, of course. Other things were on his mind.

Grabbing nervously at the edge of his jacket, Will moved forward into the sea of people, his eyes searching endlessly for the familiar face of one of his best friends. He could hear *Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now* playing at full volume and echoing among the walls of the auditorium, and in a blind moment of amusement, Will wondered if the DJ really had taken pointers from his brother.

As he stepped forward and neared the edge of the cluster of students, Will heard a familiar voice.

“Will?”

From somewhere behind him, hearing his own name being called in such confusion, Will twisted around as much as he could through the crowded dance floor as he saw two pleasant, familiar faces emerge from between a group of students.

“Oh, er... hey,” Will said simply, the phrase much too casual as he watched Lucas and Dustin approaching. They looked well; amazing, even, Will thought. It was easy to tell which of them knew the most about what they were doing. Lucas was dressed in a nice crushed velvet blazer, the colour of freshly printed gold coins. The only other colour he was wearing was presented on his shoes the exact same golden shade, the rest of his outfit, dress shirt and all, a cool, endless pitch black. As though he and Dustin had taken style pointers from each other, Dustin was wearing almost the exact opposite. His dress jacket was a deep black, where the rest of his clothes were a royal blue, again, exempt for his shoes. Will imagined, taking an honest moment to look at the two boys’ outfits, that if there were awards given out at such an event for best dressed attendees, Lucas and Dustin would come in at a hard tie for gold.

“What’re you doing here?” Dustin questioned in an astonished jab, his voice barely audible over the sound of Morrissey’s voice echoing inside the gymnasium. Glancing briefly to his right, Will watched as groups of teens swayed along to the music, entertained by the fact that plenty of them seemed to be moving in a way that suggested they didn’t know the beat of the song all that well. He was wasting his time, he knew this, but he couldn’t help but try and dull the knot inside of his chest. What was he there for?

Well, he knew what. *Who*.

“I, just, uh... changed my mind. I got bored at home,” Will suggested in a bold faced lie, his eyes scanning the heads inside of the auditorium as he searched for one familiar head of black hair.

“You changed your mind, huh,” Lucas repeated slowly, his voice all but impressed as Will’s attention snapped back to him. He raised his brows slightly, just enough to throw Will for a slight loop.

Changed your mind, my ass, his stare said. Will wouldn’t correct himself, of course.

“Have you guys seen Blue?” Will spoke suddenly, no longer beating around the bush as his gaze drifted back towards the crowd, trying to cover up the vulnerable feeling he had inside of his chest. As his eyes roamed, Dustin was the first to respond to him.

“He left.”

Going still, Will's head turned a bit too quickly back towards his two friends. The knot grew tighter.

"He... left?" Will repeated, his heart sinking into his stomach. Dustin gave Will a strained smile, shrugging his shoulders.

"Yeah, like, *just*. He went," Dustin began, throwing a hand out, Will's eyes following his gesture towards the side gym doors, "out that way. You could probably still catch him if you want, but... he seemed a little *bumped*."

Bumped, Will thought.

Well, doesn't that make two of us.

"I, uh... I'm gonna go see if I can find him," Will spoke out loud, though he was actively stepping away from the two as he turned to push back through the crowd and out towards the doors. From behind him, Will could hear Lucas calling out to him.

"What's so important that you need—"

"I'll be back!" Will called out, not even turning back to say so as he shifted and slid through the gaps between students and hurried his way towards the doors. He couldn't find it in himself to promise that he would do so, because he truly wasn't sure. As he made his way to the side doors and rested his fingers against the push bar, Morrissey's voice melted into the smooth sound of Billy Walker's *Funny How Time Slips Away*, and that subtle shift in tone was the only incentive Will needed to shove open the doors and step back outwards into the cool

December night air.

As Will stepped outdoors and took a long look around, he felt loneliness seeping into the very crooks of his bones. The side doors of the gym led out towards the secondary parking lot that had been built specifically for this side of Hawkins Middle, but particularly in the dead of night on a dance evening, the place was practically deserted. If not for the gentle hum of guitar music resonating from the building behind him, Will might have thought the place was entirely abandoned. Not a single car was parked out there, and as he took a long look to his left, Will felt that chilly feeling drowning out his thoughts once more.

He's already well gone, Will thought to himself, disappointment stabbing into him like pins and needles. *I missed him. I missed it.*

As Will twisted right and turned to move back towards the gym doors, he saw Blue.

When Dustin said *just*, Will understood, he had really meant it. Blue was only halfway across the parking lot, back to Will with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his warm brown blazer as he walked slowly further. Will's heart, where it had sunk deep into the pit of his torso, was suddenly launched into his throat at catapult speed.

Stepping forward and fully into the parking lot, Will found his voice again.

"Hey, Paladin!" Will blurted, his voice carrying across the empty lot in an almost echoing fashion as he watched Blue halt in his tracks. He took no time in whipping around and turning back to face Will, and

the moment he had, Will felt as though he might have melted into the pavement beneath him.

He looked handsome, that Will knew. He'd expected it, and yet he hadn't been ready. Blue's hair was smooth and tucked behind his ears, his bangs still hanging loosely just above his eyes like they always seemed to. His blazer was buttoned, and underneath he wore a thick blue knit sweater vest, the head of a blood red tie peaking out from beneath the neck of said vest. Hands still resting deep in his pockets, Will could have sworn for a moment that Blue's eyes seemed to light up.

"Will?" Blue asked in what sounded like sheer surprise, stepping forward slowly before he began a casual walk back towards Will.

Will was suddenly aware, even though he'd cleaned up nice, of how regular he felt next to Blue. The space between them closed quickly.

"You're leaving?" Will asked, and the corners of Blue's lips turned up into a sheepish smile, like he was caught in an embarrassing moment.

"Yeah, I, uh," Blue began, drawing a hand from his pocket and placing it against the back of his neck, "—I just wasn't feeling very, y'know... into it."

"Into it?" Will repeated, absently, and through his sudden embarrassment, Blue's smile grew.

“You changed your mind?” Blue asked, tearing the subject away from himself, and Will simply nodded, not quite knowing what else to say. Words felt wasted, pointless even, and in some way the both of them began to comprehend that their small talk wasn’t doing much to make up for the steady growing understanding between them.

“If you want to leave, don’t let me sto—“ Will began, shameful, though he didn’t get far.

“Do you want to dance?” Blue blurted, sudden and brief, but Will had caught every syllable of it, shutting up the moment Blue had spoken. If words could kill, Will might have keeled over right then.

The music was slow, still, and Will was acutely aware of that fact. The song was beautiful, of course, but it was definitely *slow*. It wasn’t the kind of song you could get a groove on to, and it wasn’t the kind of song you danced to with a group of people. Bitterly, Will bit down on his tongue.

He knows that, Will thought.

He knows that, doesn’t he? That’s why he asked.

“I don’t know how to dance,” Will admitted, his pulse growing rapid as he stared across the few feet between them, assessing Blue’s expression as he seemed to grow contemplative. Tipping his head ever so slightly, Blue turned his gaze towards the school, their faces lit up by nothing more than the vibrant white light inside the building and the heavy full moon above them.

“Neither do I. I bet we could learn pretty quick, though,” he suggested, his eyes finding their way back and meeting Will’s gaze. Yes didn’t need to be spoken out loud then. It was felt in the way that they looked at each other, and spared tiny nods back and forth.

Yes, I want to dance with you, Will wanted to scream as he stepped forward, mirroring Blue. *I’ve wanted to dance with you for longer than I can remember. Literally.*

The space between them dwindled to no more than a foot, and Will, following only what he had seen briefly inside of the auditorium on his way out, lifted his slightly trembling hands and placed them securely on Blue’s shoulders. He was taller, but not by a whole lot; just enough that Will had to look up to meet his stares whenever he found the courage to. Will, who had spent the car ride there cursing his height and seeming lack of growth, suddenly felt like he wanted to stay his current stature forever, if it meant they could stay like that. Just like that.

“I’m going to... I’m going to put my hands on your waist, alright?” Blue spoke suddenly, his voice quiet now, just loud enough for Will to hear. Pretending like his heart hadn’t grinded to a halt for several seconds, Will simply nodded, pressing his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

“That’s what you’re supposed to do, isn’t it?” Will suggested with a tiny laugh, and Blue, embarrassment flashing across his face, dipped his head and let out an airy, nervous laugh.

“Right,” he murmured, and placed his hands in their allotted place, going quiet as the two of them began to sway.

Dancing, Will discovered, wasn't hard when you were dancing with someone you cared for. This could be said for most things.

It didn't have to be elaborate, and it didn't have to be perfect. It only had to *be*, and the two of them were capable of doing just that. Swaying peacefully to the sound of guitar strums and humming vocals, Will felt like this was exactly what the old Will had hoped for, and what the new Will had dreamed of.

He was alive in that moment, and as though they both knew it was bound to happen, Will's hands shifted to intertwine with each other behind Blue's neck, just as Blue's arms slid all the way around Will's waist.

They didn't know how to dance, and yet somehow, they sure seemed like they did.

Whatever it was, the gentle movements and bare minimum; it was contact, and it was enough. As Will's fingers looped around one another, Blue broke the silence between them, shattering the peace and simultaneously bringing the thunder.

"Will?" Blue whispered, his voice as sweet as honey, barely audible over the background noise as Will drew back a bit to look at him.

"Hm?" Will whispered in a serene hum, but his response to nothing in particular fell unanswered. Where Will suddenly wondered if Blue was about to spill something heavy on him, his fingers tightened ever so slightly as the boy twisted his head and peered down into Will's eyes.

Something cracked inside of Will, like a whip. An electric shock travelling up the backs of his arms and right through his fingertips, like he'd been struck by lightening.

Will sensed it, in some way, before it happened.

It wasn't a true knowledge of what Blue was about to do, but rather, a thin sort of connection between the two that snapped just as Blue leaned forward. This didn't stop Will's breath from hitching in his throat, though, and it most definitely did not calm his heartbeat down. Yet, for the first time, Will didn't look around to see who could see them.

He didn't care who was looking at Blue unless it was himself.

And as Blue leaned in and pressed a sweet, innocent kiss to Will's lips, Will didn't hesitate to kiss him back.

Like clockwork, like his body knew what it was doing before his brain, Will's arm slid back from its previous spot against Blue's shoulder as his fingertips found their way to Blue's cheek. His eyes had drifted closed and he felt a significant warmth spread across his cheeks. His heartbeat rung in his ears, and he knew he was blushing, of course, but right then he couldn't find the patience to care. Blue wouldn't catch his blush. Even if he did; was it not expected?

The embrace was brief and yet sugar sweet, stained in Will's brain as Blue drew back, hesitant, like he could linger there for days to come.

Will's fingers remained flush against Blue's cheek for several seconds after, however, stunned into silence as his eyes fluttered open once more. Will thought his heart might burst right then; explode right in his chest like a bomb as their eyes met.

Neither of them looked around. Neither of them cared to.

There was a new sense of understanding between them, at that moment, and there was no doubt that the both of them were well aware of this. A step had been crossed and the foundation of their friendship that they'd been standing on before had crumbled beneath them. The new plateau they rested on was something more than that, built from remains. As Blue peered down into Will's eyes, and a poorly restrained smile broke across his lips, and Will watched with sheer admiration as Blue quietly began to snicker.

Like a switch, all at once, the two of them broke into careless laughter.

It was uncontrollable, at first; Will tucked his forehead into Blue's shoulder, trying to stifle the torrents of giggles that ripped through his chest. His fingers fell to the boy's upper arms as he held onto him, feeling Blue trembling with laughter beneath him. He couldn't quite pinpoint what was going on, and the feeling swimming inside of Will's chest were muddled and blended to the point where they could not be deciphered.

He knew there was joy, deep down; there was joy and it was erupting in his chest. If one thing stood out to him, it was that, and as their laughs melted into breathless, airy mumblings, Will pulled back from the boy in front of him, finding his eyes again.

This time, *for the first time*, Will thought, he wasn't worried about what he might say.

"Wha... What was *that* for?" Will exhaled slowly, eyes scanning Blue's face for some sort of explanation. Blue's hands had dropped from their spot against Will's waist, their previously pristine dance form coming apart at the seams. Letting out one last breathy laugh, Blue raised his hands and pressed his palms flat against his face, covering it for only a moment before he let his fingers fall limply from his complexion.

"Because you're *you*," Blue responded, his tone sure but his words ambiguous. As a smile traced Will's lips, he tipped his head weakly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well," Blue began, gazing past Will and towards the trees surrounding the gym's back parking lot, like making eye contact was too much for *him*.

"For being you. Y'know, I thought when you were there in the hospital... I thought after you got out, you might forget about all of us. About me," Blue urged, his voice low like he was uttering something private. Mimicking his actions from earlier that afternoon, Blue reached down and snatched one of Will's hands, folding his fingers against Will's. There was a tenderness in Blue's voice that drew Will in. The kind of tenderness one only finds in the sharing of secrets.

“You could’ve become a completely different, Will, but you *didn’t*. You’re still the same Will, the Will *I* knew,” Blue paused, shaking his head and pursing his lips for a moment like he was trying to find the right words to say. He wasn’t really aware that they were all right.

They were all right. Everything he was saying was right, good, amazing, great, bursting inside of Will’s head like fireworks.

“Still you. The same kid that would roll for a fireball instead of casting protection,” Blue carried on, another short chuckle escaping his lips as he flexed his fingers against Will’s.

Standing in front of Blue then, as Will listened to him speak, as much as his heart soared, something shifted deep inside him. Like a strong stomach ache suddenly coming to life, Will’s throat felt like it was locking up. *Panic*, Will thought at first, but he wasn’t experiencing anything else. Chalking it up to adrenaline, Will stared up at Blue peacefully, quirked an eyebrow.

“What do you mean?” Will asked slowly, eyeing the boy in front of him. Glancing down at he spoke, Blue faltered for a moment as he sensed the confusion in Will’s voice. He looked contemplative, hesitant as he watched Will’s expression shift ever so slightly. Like he was tasting the words before the spoke, getting a feel for the waters he was about to delve into, Blue clamped his tongue between his teeth for a split second before he carried on.

“The night you left my house and got in your accident,” Blue admitted suddenly, his voice growing softer, “you rolled to fireball the Dem— the monster, the Demogorgon. You didn’t cast protection, like you could have.”

Blue's voice was almost childlike with excitement, or maybe pride, giving Will's hand a tender squeeze of affirmation as he spoke.

"You'd done it before, I don't know why I remember, but you did. You've done it before, years ago, back in 7th grade. You always do it, Will. You got it this time, but... it wasn't even that, though. It's not about the game. You were always so ready to just jump into things. You never cared about what the consequences might be, you know? That night you got hurt, everyone was leaving, and you sat there in the basement with me and you told me you—"

"—Rolled a seven."

Like a cool gust of wind had rushed right through the narrow channels of Will's veins, the previously grumbling stomach ache grew into a thunderous roar throughout Will's body. The words had escaped his lips like they were propelled by jet power. He hadn't even known where they'd come from, but as his eyes fell and he stared into the caramel brown of Blue's dress jacket, Will felt their presence reverberate inside of him and his fingers clutched at Blue's hand.

"... What?"

Will couldn't force his body to work properly, but he knew as he stared numbly into the fabric, Blue must have been staring down at him with a shock so raw that he could have sent Will reeling.

"Will, I... No, you..." Blue fumbled as though he didn't know what to

approach first, his fingers suddenly growing tighter against Will's as Blue's other hand found Will's upper arm.

"Will," Blue began, fingers easing against Will's upper arm, "that night you got hurt, you told me that you *loved* me."

Suddenly, like century old icebergs cracking and splintering apart, the protective plate that hovered over everything Will had been trying to grasp shattered. He could see color, full color, dining room tables and multi-faceted dice and game boards pieces and Blue's face. Over and over, younger, but Blue.

Younger but still him.

"W...wait....you— you... remembered that," Blue uttered in sudden understanding, his words nothing more than a breath.

Will spoke, and his words held a weight like they'd been cooped up inside him for centuries.

"S...seven....T...That night.... Years ago....I..... I rolled...." Will spoke, his voice feeling like it was echoing a million miles away from his physical body, and like a switch had been flicked inside of his brain, his muscles went slack and his fingers loosened from Blue's, the corners of his vision flashing with dim, black splotches, and Will's legs gave out from underneath him.

He hit the ground hard, but not in any particular spot that mattered.

Every inch of his body took the toll, where his head had been the primary victim only just over a month before. His skin was alive like each and every nerve ending was hot and exposed, and as Will felt the loose chips of asphalt dig into the backs of his pant legs, he stared upwards in a daze, only half capable of seeing Blue kneeling down towards him as he—

—spared a small wave goodbye to Dustin and Lucas as they both traipsed upstairs, disappearing through the open door at the top of the steps and shutting it with a pleasant click. The basement was toasty, even more so for Will as he sat on the right side of the couch, a thick, slightly oversized knit sweater adorning his upper body as he tucked himself into the cushions. He didn't know how long it would take him to pick up his nerves and get going, but he knew it wasn't going to be quick enough to stop the conversation Will could sense was about to happen.

Of course it was going to happen, Will had thought. He never leaves these things alone. I don't know why he never leaves it alone. It happens all the time.

This time it was different, though. He could ignore it all he wanted and act as stubborn as he felt he could, but this time was different. Troy didn't just heckle Will over his shoes, or his hair, or the way that he walked. He said something else.

It was different.

“Will?”

His throat had felt like it had a clenched hand tightened around it

as Will turned to look at the boy next to him. He looked just as soft and sleepy as Will did; wrapped in a deep blue turtleneck with a heavy throw draped over his shoulders as his arms slid around his knees. Where the boy was facing him head on, chin resting against his kneecap, Will was turned towards the stairs like he was waiting for a way out. He knew how easy it would be to just run, but why would he?

“...Will?”

Glancing back towards the dark haired boy, Will felt his chest seize once more.

“Yeah?” he mustered. Inching back a bit and straightening up, the boy let his knees fall into a crossed position as he watched Will.

“Is it true?” he asked plainly, hardly skipping a beat as his eyes fixed on Will’s expression.

Will could feel his heart hammering against his chest, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. Placing a hand on his thigh and beginning to fuss with the seam on his jeans, Will couldn’t carry on the respectful act of keeping eye contact with his friend. Turning his gaze down, Will let out a long breath. When he didn’t respond quick enough, the boy began again.

“I know he picks on you a lot, and I know he says stupid stuff, Will, but,” he carried on, eyes never leaving Will’s face, “I need to know if what he said today was actually true.”

“Would you be mad if it was?” Will whispered suddenly, every drop of blood in his veins feeling like it was draining out of him. He felt woozy from the panic, from the strain against his nerves. Nevertheless, he didn’t budge.

As though Will had just made a solid crack, the boy across from him let out a short, startled laugh.

“Would I be mad?” he demanded quietly, unfolding himself and scooting across the couch so that he was within no more than two feet of Will’s trembling frame. Will thought his fight or flight might kick in any second, and he would flee up the stairs like a startled animal. He remained, unmoving, and the boy continued.

“Will, I— that’s stupid. I couldn’t never be mad at you for something like that. Otherwise, I’d have to be mad at myself, too,” the boy carried on, releasing one side of the blanket over him as he reached out and snatched Will’s hand away from it’s spot on his leg. He clutched it tight, a reassuring squeeze, then a whisper that Will thought might tear his heart right out of his chest.

“If it’s true, then that’s good. Because—“ the boy began, his voice seeming to catch as he stared down at their conjoined hands, “—because, I... I feel the same.”

Will was suddenly, violently aware of every single inch of his body. He was aware of the way his cheeks had lit up, the way his fingers folded against the boy’s like their hands were created to be held by each other. Raising his head, Will finally twisted a bit to look at him.

“You do?”

Biting back a smile, the boy’s eyes grew soft, searching Will’s face for what seemed like ages.

“Always have,” he responded, slowly, and through the haze that Will felt descending over his thoughts, he could have sworn that he felt—

--like he'd been whipped across the forehead with a baseball bat. His vision was sinking in and out, his heart running full speed like he'd just completed a 20K marathon in 10 minutes. He could feel arms, one set, wrapped around him, and he was in a tight embrace for a moment, feeling the warmth of another human being against his own chilled body.

He couldn't see, but he could feel. The pinch of the gravelly bits beneath him on the parking lot, the sensation of the cool winter wind biting at the exposed part of his neck. He couldn't see, but he could feel, could hear, dully but surely, and he could smell, oh he could smell. He could smell, as he had for weeks, the strong scent of cinnamon, sugar and—

—flour, please,” Will mumbled softly as he peered down at the oversized apron he'd tied around his waist, dusting his fingers off on the fabric. The sun was streaming dutifully through the kitchen window above the sink, one of the last truly warm days in the early fall of '85, and from behind him as he peered into the bowl of ingredients before him, Will could hear the sound of his best friend fumbling with glass jars in the cupboard. He didn't have to look behind him to know exactly what the boy was doing. He was doing what he always did when they baked things together: nothing overtly useful.

Glancing back over his shoulder and wiping the baking powder dusted back of his hand against his forehead, Will watched in utter amusement as the dark haired boy in front of him sat lazily on the kitchen counter, his torso twisted to the left as he attempted to ease half a bag of flour out of the cupboard like a stubborn pet. Will let out a disbelieving laugh, and as the dark haired boy glanced towards him, his eyes seemed to light up.

“Got something to say, Byers?” he asked coyly, fishing the bag off of the shelf and scooting a couple inches over towards the sink, offering the bag out to him. Turning away from his work, Will took a few tentative steps towards the boy, shrugging his shoulders.

“Mm... nothing. Nothing at all, lazy pants,” Will chided as he reached out for the bag, halting as the boy swung it out of his reach. Putting on a hasty frown, Will reached out once more, but the boy stretched out once again. A pout, now, washed over Will’s face.

“Asshole,” he murmured. This coerced a pure, unbridled laugh from the boy in front of him, and though he’d never admit it for as long as he lived, Will’s heart sung in that moment.

“You’ve got names today, huh? Oh, whatever. You want it that bad?” the boy urged, watching Will’s face with a look of undoubted mischief as he dipped his hand into the bag. Will, knowing the way this always worked, began to spin away in the other direction, but he was only a moment too late.

The boy lifted his cupped fingers out of the bag and flung a good few tablespoons of flour in Will’s direction, earning a yelp from the Byers boy as the flour landed against the side of his neck and tainted his hair. Facing the small island in the boy’s kitchen, Will’s fingers gripped the counter for only a second before his eyes had landed on the small dish of baking powder he’d left there. A blessing in disguise, Will cringed as another bout of flower landed on his back, a sly smile breaking across his lips as he dipped his fingers into the powder and twisted back to face his assailant.

“Oh, you want to play games—“ Will began, but as he turned fully and threw his hand forward, he felt the sudden grab of his wrists as the boy, off the counter and only a foot or so from him then, took a solid dose of baking powder to the forehead. Will’s eyes flew open wider and a tiny gasp escaped his lips as he stared into the boy’s face, his expression screwed up as Will watched tiny pieces of the powder fall against his shut eyelids, his eyelashes tainted with the

white dust. As Will stared at him, one wrist clutched gently in the boy's grip, the boy let out a small but sharp exhale, and a plume of powder blew from the tip of his nose. This was enough to send Will into a fit of giggles.

"You think it's funny, huh?" the boy tried to chide, his voice only half serious as a slow smile wormed its way onto his lips. His eyes still pressed tightly shut, Will tried his best to stifle his laughter as he reached out with his free hand, sliding his fingers through the boy's bangs as he shook out the thick layer of baking powder. The boy flinched only lightly, his hand flying up to grab at Will, though he was quickly smacked away.

"I think it's really funny, actually," Will murmured, his voice soft now as his fingers worked delicately at the dust, running his fingers over the boy's eyelids and brushing the ingredient away. Once he felt safe enough, Will still dusting the powder from his raven hair, his eyes fluttered open, meeting Will's gaze in an instant. Will's hands froze, and he would have remained standing there like a stone statue only a foot away from the boy's face for as long as he'd been allowed if a sharp voice from behind them hadn't shocked him out of his stupor.

"What the hell!" Nancy yelped, watching as Will turned back towards her, his face flushing a bright red. An embarrassed smile was his only true response, and she shook her head impatiently, trying to keep a straight face though it really didn't seem to be working.

"Jesus... you guys better clean this up, or I swear to god—"

"We'll clean it, Nance. Do you want cookies or not?" the dark haired boy across from Will spoke, and as he did so, Will could hear his voice drifting back as he put more distance between them. Whatever inches he was creating between them quickly turned to feet, and Will could feel the space stretching and bending much too far for his tastes.

Come back, Will had thought. Stay here. Just for a little bit longer. It doesn't need to mean anything, because I know it doesn't. I just need you to—

“—answer me, Will, *please*,” Blue urged, his fingers wrapped around the boy’s upper arms as he knelt down in front of him. Will could hear him plenty, though his voice seemed to reverberate around the inside of Will’s brain. He felt like he’d been struck, his vision slowly returning but still much too blotted out and fuzzy for him to really be able to focus on anything. His heart hadn’t slowed; it still yammered to no end against his ribcage, like it wanted to bust right through. Colors danced against the backs of Will’s eyelids, information flooding through him like someone had busted the floodgate that had been holding everything back. All at once was too much, too much, or was it not enough?

It was never enough.

He could feel adrenaline coursing through him like acid, only adding to the throbbing inside his brain as the wind—

--whipped past him. It was that night again, of course, that night, and Will knew it. He was there, for a moment, but more like he was there in the sense that he was watching the night through the screen of an old television. He wasn't there, but he was. He wasn't there, in that moment, but that night he had been. It was that night. That same night he'd felt first, before anything else.

That night, Will felt the most present in his own body that he'd ever been in all of his 14 years. He was there, fully, unabashedly. He was there, in love, and the person he loved felt the same. God, what a feeling that was. To love and be loved back.

He saw himself riding down Mirkwood, his fingers wrapped tightly around his handlebars as his legs stretched out to their full potential. He wasn't sitting, god, Will had been too full of pure energy, too full of pure love and an extraordinary sense of tranquility to sit down. So down the road he had soared, standing up on the pedals, his hair pushed back from his face as the cool wind whipped past him.

He was screaming, Will remembered. He was screaming, not out of fright or out of anger but out of raw happiness. He was soaring down the street, only the streetlights keeping him company at such an unholy hour, and he was screaming. Loud and proud, not afraid of who might hear him, what did he care? He couldn't find it in him to be courteous to anyone sleeping, he didn't care. He didn't care. He was in love, he was, he knew it, and the boy he loved felt the same way.

He could have died right then, in that blissful state of rippling joy, and he would have been content with that for the most part. Inside of the memory playing against the backs of his eyelids like an old super 8 film, he nearly did.

He didn't die, that was evident. Death would have been merciful.

Instead, he'd lost everything.

The film spun and spun and Will remembered the sudden crack he'd heard as the tire of his bike had slipped off the side of the road, turning him onto his side and throwing him shoulder and head first into the incredibly steep ditch on the side of the road. The opening to the path home. He had been nearly home then, almost in the

safety of his own house, but he hadn't quite made it. He'd been happy and screaming out praises and in love, so much so, and in an instant, as his head had met the packed earth that made up this pathway, everything had been stolen from him and like so, the film memory playing inside of his brain caught fire, everything splintering into a violent white.

I lost you the night we found each other, Will's thoughts screamed.

He wanted to cry, needed to cry, but he was ripped back, stripped away, the memory resonating and staying but being drawn back like he was zooming out, and suddenly he was—

--being shaken, ever so gently but enough to pull him out of his head like he'd simply been dreaming the entire time. His vision had dwindled back into it's regular state, but somehow, it seemed clearer, even if only in comparison. There were no splotches in his sight, and his hearing was practically pristine, no longer shrouded in what felt like empty auditorium echoes. He could see now, clearly, literally and figuratively, and as he stared upwards into Blue's terrified eyes, Will began to weep.

He'd been crying all week, hell, he'd been crying a lot lately, but this was different. There was nothing sad about his tears this time, only reconnaissance, understanding. He got it then, he really did. He got that pain, that hurt that Blue was feeling.

He'd felt all of it, at least the majority of it, in a matter of minutes.

"Will, please," Blue whispered, his hands tight on Will's jacket as he stared down into Will's face with demanding eyes. He needed to know what had happened, but how could Will explain that? How

could he? He was still reeling, his brain tumbling over and over like a running washing machine. He stared up at Blue instead of speaking, words feeling utterly meaningless as he examined his face, and suddenly, Blue was nothing and everything all at once. Like an explosive blast to the back of Will's brain, the part that had been hiding so, so well. He realized then, as his fingers tightened, that he was holding onto the boy for dear life.

Will gazed up at him, and he could only imagine through the violent expulsion of reconnaissance that had just coursed through his brain, that his face must have been one of pure, unadulterated love. Love, of course, like it always had been. Love in the way that Will wondered if he'd ever experienced anything else.

In a blind, unfocused moment, gripping onto Blue's jacket sleeves like a vice, Will wondered if there was ever a time when he wasn't fully in love with the boy kneeling in front of him.

He was Blue, but god, he was so much more. He was the smell of cinnamon and sugar, the scent of cedar and calloused fingers and the feeling of sweaters borrowed, nights spent awake and days spent sleeping with knees tangled together and foreheads tucked into shoulders. Long days spent in the kitchen baking cookies and bread and ending up with flour all over their clothes, whispering secrets and kind words through giggles erupting in their chests. Words and feelings and everything colliding at once in a supernova of feeling, emotion, and *god*, love. Love so blind, so honest that it ached inside Will's chest like a cavity. And that *word*. Swimming around behind Will's eyelids like a flashing neon sign.

He was Blue, but right then, he was every shade of every color visible to a human eye. He was more than that, even. He was everything.

Everything.

Everything.

“...Will?” the boy before him whispered once more, every image that Will had of him becoming brittle and shattering as he spoke.

As Will's fingers loosened around the fabric of his childhood best friends blazer, instead looping tenderly around his upper arms, Will met the boy's eyes for the first time in what felt like hours, and though the cold wind whipped at the side of his face, Will felt nothing but a long awaited warmth deep inside of him.

Gazing up into that familiar pitch black stare, Will could feel his eyes brimming and blurring before his fingertips even brushed the tear stained skin of the boy's cheeks. That word. That word he'd fought so hard for felt like a breeze against his lips.

Leaning forward, Will's fingers found the boy's cheek, and through his tears he let out a choked, careless laugh. The type of laugh that could only exist in some sort of paradise on earth, and Will was in it, right then.

“Mike,” Will whispered.

14. after

Staring hard into the bathroom mirror, his fingers wrapped tightly around the porcelain base of the Byers' sink, Mike truly thought for a moment that his reflection was staring right back through him.

He didn't know quite why he was so nervous, all he knew was that his nerves, feeling exposed and hot, were shot and he couldn't quite calm the overbearing hum inside of his chest. Tearing his gaze away from the mirror where he'd been shooting daggers into his own reflection only moments before, Mike glanced outwards to the left, raven black eyes scanning the glass of the small single window high up on the wall across from the toilet.

The snow was still falling, and in some way, watching the snowflakes drift aimlessly downwards through the blurred windowpane instilled peace in the boy. In reality, he knew very well why he was nervous. Giving gifts was never something that Mike was completely comfortable with, and in some odd way, giving them always came back to *him*. What if *he* didn't do well enough in choosing a present? What if they hated *him* for doing a poor job? It was stupid, he knew that. Yet there he was, half trapped in the Byers' bathroom as he tried to find some sense of calm to work with before he had to give Will his gift.

From inside the tiny room, Mike could hear the smooth croon of Blue Christmas drifting throughout the house.

"Calm down, Wheeler," Mike whispered only to himself, his words feeling weighted as he stared out the window. He was breathing

deeply, letting out long, subtly relieving exhale as his eyes dropped from the sink. The predicament he was in was silly, and he knew it. He'd been the only one to do this to himself. He could have just stayed home early Christmas Eve, like he usually did, even if he hadn't wanted to. He could think of better things to do than sit and drink hot chocolate with parents he hardly spoke to, listening to someone like Armstrong (but not as good, of course,) and wishing he was with Will. So he decided, to the distaste of his mother, that he would be with Will on Christmas Eve.

So here I am, Mike thought to himself cheaply as his fingers flexed against the sink's edge. Here I am, doing exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to go see him. So here I am, at Will's house, in Will's bathroom, hiding from him because I don't want him to think that his boyfriend is a total lame-o.

Twisting his fingers against the sink, Mike's face turned back down towards the porcelain bowl, a smile creeping across his lips.

I might never get used to that, he thought.

From outside the door, a gentle knock echoed against its wooden surface. Bringing Mike out of his trance, he turned towards the door, his heart racing.

"S-Sorry, just a minute," Mike replied weakly, his eyes lingering on the mirror for a moment before he finally took a look at the door.

"No rush, honey," Joyce spoke softly from outside the bathroom, her voice patient and sweet as a mother's voice should be, "I'm just running out to grab some icing. Wanted to see if you needed anything?"

Mike's hand drifted from the sink and fell from the bathroom counter, rising and laying gently against his stomach. He'd never really considered just how much he appreciated Joyce before, but goodness, he sure did. There was never really a good time to tell her this, never a specific moment when it had stood out to him. Rather, it had been an accumulation over the years, more prominently in the strenuous past month and a half that they'd both gone a little crazy during. She did a lot for him, and he wasn't even her own blood. He made a mental note to thank her the next time he got a chance, when a bathroom door wasn't separating them.

"N-No, I'm okay, Joyce. Thank you," Mike replied slowly, hearing the woman's feet shuffle slightly.

"Well, alright," she said finally, and Mike could imagine the smile that was likely crossing her face. "I'll be back shortly. You three be good," she poked, and as she walked away, her footsteps growing lighter, more muffled as she went, Mike knew they would be.

Taking one last, much needed deep breath, Mike listened as the front door opened and shut in unison, and reached outwards, wrapping his fingers around the bathroom doorknob and twisting it open.

The Byers' place always smelled like something delicious was cooking, and most of the times Mike had come over, there was. As he stepped out into the hallway this time, it smelled like cooked Christmas turkey and fresh vegetables. The house was dim, lit mostly by the dull kitchen bulb and the lights strung up around the Christmas tree, but it was enough to give the place a heavenly glow. Mike's heart fluttered as he scrunched his socked feet against the carpet, taking a moment to exhale before he heard that one familiar,

pleasant voice.

“Mike, are you coming back out or am I going to have to come save you from the bathroom monster?”

Will’s voice did nothing to calm his heartbeat. Mike absently reached up and placed a hand over his heart, that same childlike smile crossing his lips again. Mike. *Mike*.

I’ll never get used to that, either, he thought.

“I’m coming, just wait,” Mike called back, swallowing hard as he rounded the corner into the living room. His eyes roamed the sight before him.

“I almost opened it before you got back,” Will admitted from the couch, his face a wash of subtle embarrassment as he crossed his legs in front of him. Will was tucked into the far side of the Byers’ couch, a blanket wrapped around his waist as he held the lap-sized box in his hands. He gave Mike a small smile, earning one back easily, before Mike glanced down at the gift. He let out a quiet laugh, hoping he didn’t sound *too* nervous, before he approached the couch, settling into the spot next to Will.

“You know you’re not opening yours before Christmas, right?” Will assured the boy next to him, giving him a watchful eye as Mike shrugged.

“That’s okay. I just wanted to be with you when you opened yours,” he responded, watching with growing anxiety as Will turned his head down, observing the wrapped present before him.

“Can I...?” Will whispered, like a child on, well, Christmas morning.

“I’d like you to,” Mike whispered back.

He watched, resisting the urge to fidget, as Will ran a smooth hand over the side of the small box, wandering until he finally snagged a finger on one wrapped edge of the gift. He didn’t know why he was so nervous, it was just a gift. He’d given them before, many times since they’d met. This was a little bit different though, wasn’t it? It sure felt like it. Observing Will as he peeled the paper back from the box beneath, Mike shifted back on the couch, bringing his legs up into a criss-cross position.

“It’s kinda stupid, but—“ Mike began.

“Stop it, you,” Will urged, pulling the last of the wrapping paper off. Easily, Will pried open the top of the box carefully and flipped open the lid.

His hands hovered over the opening for a few seconds, almost hesitant, before he reached into the box and slid out the book inside.

He practically knew the cover by hand. He’d seen it several times, he’d picked it out himself, and he’d wrapped it up carefully and

precisely, yet again, by himself. Still, Mike found himself pausing to stare at it's subtly reflective surface. It was a beautiful deep blue, the colour of a pristine summer sky. The type of blue that tinted the waters of foreign beaches. Around the edge was a thin elastic binding strap, stretched around the ends of the book to keep it from flying open on it's own. Will cradled the object in his hand like it was worth a million dollars, placing his thumb tenderly against the gold brushed edges of the paper.

Eyes flittering from the cover to Will's face, Mike's heart threatened to jump right up through his throat and out of his mouth. Will had a look, one particular look, on his face. A look of heavy surprise, engraved in the curl of his lips and the edges of his widened eyes. He looked like he was staring down at a chest full of treasure. Fingertips pressing into the cover ever so slightly, Will glanced towards Mike, taken aback.

"Mike, how much did this c—"

"Open it," Mike murmured, searching Will's expression as the two boys stared at each other. Blinking several times like he was bringing himself out of a state, Will sucked his bottom lip between his teeth as he turned forward again and opened up the sketchbook's cover.

Mike had read and reread the words a million times, thinking them over until he couldn't bear to anymore, but still, he leaned slightly forward, chin brushing Will's shoulder as he stared down at the first page.

To my favourite boy,

*I know you've already got something to draw in,
but this looked too nice to pass it up. All I ask
is that when you draw me, make sure I've got
a cool looking sword in my hand. Alright?*

Blue

Staring down into the book, Mike felt Will shift just slightly beneath him, his chin still resting stable on Will's shoulder as the boy sat back just slightly. Their shoulders bumped into each other, gently, and Will let out an exhale that sounded like it had been trapped inside of his chest for decades.

"Draw me sometime," Mike repeated, as though Will hadn't just read the words on his own. Will reached out slowly, tracing a finger over Mike's messy lettering, a tiny, contemplative smile playing on his lips. The look that crossed his face then was thoughtful, *very*, and he sat in silence like this for for a moment, before he whispered back.

"I draw you all the time, Mike."

Mike's hand, previously drumming nervously against his knee, settled against Will's upper arm. His thumb brushed circles against the fabric of Will's sweater. He could feel his heart swelling inside of his chest, filling with warmth and adoration. He thought for a moment, *my, I've spent too long without you saying my name. I'd like to hear it again. A few times. Always and forever.*

Mike had never thought his name to be anything special until Will had said it.

“Do you?” Mike murmured.

“All the time,” Will whispered again, the words sounding like they fell heavy on his tongue. In the entirety of the Byers’ living room, Mike felt like there wasn’t an ounce of oxygen left for him to breath.

“Will?” Mike hummed, watching as the smaller boy glanced towards him.

“Mike?” he responded.

Finding his strength once more, Mike dropped his hand from Will’s arm and reached out, stealing one of Will’s hands away from his gift.

“I love you,” he spoke, not dulling it down or diluting it, and certainly not in any way self conscious. Will could see it, and Mike could tell. The way Will’s face lit up said everything it needed to, without saying anything at all. Leaning to his side, Will tucked his forehead into Mike’s shoulder, returning the gentle squeeze of Mike’s hand against his own.

“I love you right back,” he whispered sweetly, nothing but honest.

Shutting his eyes, Mike flexed his fingers against Will’s, a peaceful

smile crossing his face as his eyes drifted shut.

Because Mike did love Will, beyond the barriers of his fifteen years and beyond even his own physical being. He loved him with every ounce of his strength, every hint of power inside of his body. He loved Will like the oceans love the moon, like century old lovers still love beyond death and life and like soulmates love each other and everywhere in between. He wondered if his body had been created to be able to hold that much love, and then he thought, easily, for Will he could.

For Will, he could hold all the love under the sun. All of it. Always.

-

“He still might remember,” Joyce had whispered, her knees growing tired as she knelt down in front of the bawling boy before him. She hadn’t seen him cry much, certainly not as he grew older and strayed from scraped knees and banged foreheads. Mike was getting to be such a tidy young man. A young man who could handle his own feelings, who would stand up for his friends, who would hold doors open for his mother.

So Joyce had knelt in front of him, watching the sobs come tearing out of his chest like he’d just watched someone die. He seemed like somebody different, somebody else entirely. He didn’t look like the Mike Wheeler she had watched grow up, not entirely. He looked weaker. He looked alone.

Mike could feel it all throughout his body, the tears dripping eagerly onto his shirt as he trembled. Anyone within the vicinity that didn’t have any context might have truly thought he’d just lost someone.

In a way, he had then.

“A....And.....and if h-he doesn’t?” Mike managed to gasp, placing the back of his hand against his forehead as a throbbing headache began to grow against his skull. The pressure banging around inside his head was horrendous, and in return, Mike stood up, twisting away from Joyce as he served the chair he was sitting on a welcome kick to the leg.

“What then?”

“Honey—“

Mike wasn’t listening. He stared down at the chair in front of him, and he kicked it. He kicked it again. And again. And again. He kicked it until he felt Joyce’s hands against his upper arms, spinning him around away from the piece of furniture as she had rose from her crouch. Joyce’s eyes were steady, filled to the brim with hurt but stronger than her pain, still. Mike hadn’t realized how hard he’d been breathing until he no longer had the rattle of the chair battering to cover it up.

“You know him, Mike,” Joyce whispered. It was true, but more than just a general sense. Reaching up and wiping the back of his sleeve against his damp cheek, Mike felt quiet hiccups rising in his chest. He forced them down the best that he could.

“B-But what... what if—“

Joyce’s grip on him tightened, more firm, as it needed to be.

“You know him,” she whispered again, and Mike understood.

He wouldn’t lose Will, because Will wouldn’t let that happen

without a fight. And he could fight. And he would.

Mike knew.

He always knew, from that very moment that his own personal hell had branched off from Will's own pain, that he would get him back. He knew Will well enough, knew how Will knew himself well enough, to be able to cling to this, even if nothing was guaranteed. Even if there was a good chance, according to the doctors and the nurses, that Will might never remember. He knew better than them, not scientifically, but deep down inside of himself.

As Mike stared towards the half-open door into Will's hospital room, Mike felt that he would get Will back someday. He didn't know then that he would, not for sure, but he felt it. He didn't know when, or how, or where he would get him back. He only knew that he would, and he would do whatever he needed to.

He would have waited forever, if he had to.

On December 16th, 1985, Mike Wheeler got Will Byers back, safe and sound, and if anyone nearby had been able to feel the sheer force of emotion that had exploded between the two boys that evening, they might have thought the entire universe was ending.

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Sitting in Will's living room, with the boy he loved tucked into his chest, Mike thought maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't have even cared if it did.

As long as he had Will by his side, Mike was home.

He couldn't, and wouldn't ever be able to remember a time when he hadn't didn't feel that way.

Notes for the Chapter:

and just like that, a story is over. a piece of this will live in me forever, i think.

to bigger and brighter things. to more stories, soon, very soon.

thank you.